

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER IN SEARCH OF LOVE AND GOD
IN HIS WRITINGS FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN

By
FRANCES VARGAS GIBBONS

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

1992

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hernán Vera was instrumental in making my dream of a PHD a reality. He and his wife María Inéz opened their hearts and home to my husband and I, and provided invaluable support. I am enormously grateful to both of them, as I am to my sister Manuela Vargas de Milá de la Roca and her husband Napoleón Milá de la Roca Parrela who introduced us to the Veras.

My special gratitude to my dissertation director, Andy Gordon. He allowed me to join his already overcrowded course in the fall of 1989, taught me the new ways of writing about literature, and encouraged my interest in Isaac Bashevis Singer. He helped transform my feelings and ideas about Singer into this dissertation without doing undue violence to my basically pleasure-oriented approach to the author and to literature in general. I consider this a feat far surpassing anything ever accomplished by Yasha Mazur and his inventor. I also thank Andy and his wife Judy for the good times spent together as friends.

I am extremely fortunate to have had the advice and support of a superb committee composed of Bernard Paris, John Cech, Warren Bargad, and Sheldon Isenberg. I thank Bernard Paris for introducing me to Third-Force psychology and for granting me so many hours of productive conference. My sincere

gratitude to John Cech for giving me the critical tools with which to approach Singer's stories for children and for his unfailing enthusiasm and warmth throughout this arduous process. I owe much to Warren Bargad and Sheldon Isenberg who guided my incursion into Jewish studies and religion with expertise and kindness. I thank them for helping me increase my knowledge of a people and culture I have always admired.

My family sustained me throughout. I thank my parents Ramón Vargas Palomo and Manuela Acuña de Vargas who have been exemplary in their indomitable devotion to family life and to humanitarian values. My siblings Yolanda, Eleida, Martha, Manuela, Malvina, Ramón and Alejandro inspired in me the desire to become an educator and have stood by me lovingly and tolerantly.

I am extremely grateful to my parents-in-law Thomas and Dorothy Gibbons and to my brother-in-law Douglas Gibbons for their loving and staunch support. My special gratitude to my sister-in-law Nancy Griffiths and her husband Albert Griffiths who provided me with a computer and facilitated my success during the first crucial semester in the program.

My husband Thomas Wolcott Gibbons supported me financially, emotionally and morally for the entire three years of graduate work and lived with this dissertation on a daily basis. Nothing can adequately describe how much I owe him for this and much else. I dedicate this work to him.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTERS	
I INTRODUCTION. ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER: THE USES OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE.....	1
II THE APPEAL AND IMPORTANCE OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER.	9
III TO BECOME IS TO TRANSGRESS.....	25
"Growing Up".....	38
"The Milk of a Lioness".....	51
IV SINGER'S HEROES AND THEIR SEARCH.....	67
"A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw".....	69
<u>The Slave</u>	78
Asa Heshel	99
V THE MAGICIAN OF LUBLIN.....	103
VI ENEMIES.....	153
VII FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD AND BACK.....	195
"Menashe and Rachel"	195
<u>Shosha</u>	209
VIII CONCLUSION.....	238
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	244
BIOGRAPHICAL DATA.....	250

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER IN SEARCH OF LOVE AND GOD
IN HIS WRITINGS FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN

By

FRANCES VARGAS GIBBONS

August, 1992

Chairman: Andrew Gordon
Major Department: English

My dissertation maintains that Isaac Bashevis Singer's art is useful in the promotion of understanding among different groups and in the exploration of the conflicts inherent in the development of human individuality. I attempt to demonstrate that the unity and continuity of Singer's oeuvre derive from its being intricately connected with his own development as a person. My central thesis is that Singer used his work as an aid to his own growth, and that, through his novels and children's stories, he searched for a benevolent God and an idealistic relationship between men and women. I discuss the children's stories "Growing Up," "The Milk of a Lioness," and "Menashe and Rachel," as well as the novels The Slave, The Magician of Lublin, Enemies, and Shosha.

My method is biographical and psychological. I see personality at the center of art, science, and history, and I believe that there is a natural, powerful urge toward the unfolding of the self. I use Third-Force psychology as well as psychoanalysis to discuss Singer's life and writings.

I also take into account feminist criticism of Singer's work. Since I believe that Singer could have never been a feminist in the modern sense, and that there are different manners of honoring the interdependence of male and female, I seek to show that despite his predilection for Schopenhauer and his patriarchal upbringing, Singer regarded women very highly (though not unambivalently), expected a great deal from them, and could not conceive of life without the company of women.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION. ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER: THE USES OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Isaac Bashevis Singer is an example of individuality triumphing over circumstances and, by so doing, being able to benefit himself, the Orthodox Jewish family and ethnic group to which his achievement was an affront, and humanity at large. His work is one of the best possible tributes to a world now gone and is probably also more useful for its imaginary reconstruction and attempted understanding than the historical documentation.

However, Singer did not act in accordance with philanthropic plans or impulses, but in response to his own individual needs. Singer used his writing as a way of becoming a distinct person in a milieu hostile to such goals, and the immoderate childhood fantasies he attributed to his fictional characters were exaggerated blueprints of what he desired to achieve as an individual. Singer wrote to find an accommodation in a difficult modern world for which his traditional Jewish upbringing did not prepare him. Through his writings, he insistently explored the possibilities of attaining an idealistic yet paradoxical love relationship: a

suprasocial, intensely sexual yet nonreproductive, growth promoting relationship between man and woman.

I begin my study of Singer and his work by commenting on some of the reasons for Singer's importance and I also take that opportunity to express my fondness for this author whose work truly puts me in emotional and aesthetic contact (information alone does not suffice) with a people I was explicitly trained (at Catechism in Venezuela) to fear and despise.

My quotation from Joseph Brodsky in chapter II reveals that I see Singer as a fellow exile of the Russian poet. However, Singer's exile is not from a country or a system of government. It is the fundamental self-exile of the growing person from his or her origins. As such, it is a very basic problem to which it is more painful and more difficult to respond constructively--let alone creatively and impartially--than national exile is. Singer negotiated this situation very successfully by enlisting the assistance of his writing.

Thus the main appeal of Singer's work is that it is connected with his life and his people and that it is so without being weakened by sentimentality or tarnished by partiality. I use The Family Moskat and Satan in Goray to illustrate Singer's ability to look at his people objectively, to present versions of himself who, like Asa Heshel, are not in the least self-flattering, and to create characters of overwhelming vitality who (like Singer himself) refuse to live

according to what Singer preached in his interviews and lectures.

The two novels briefly considered in chapter II are also important historical documents, but they do not solely record historical events, they flesh them out and provide analyses of the occurrences. Satan in Goray looks at religious excess as mere fanaticism and concludes that, as such, it is ultimately destructive. The Family Moskat is a touching and powerful depiction of the difficulties involved in attempting to reach an accommodation between community and individual, religious impulse and rationality, old-fashioned values and modernity, and closely knit and strictly regulated religions and the world.

Singer grew up amid the tensions his historical novels so poignantly depict, and in chapter III, I use biographical information and psychology to illuminate his personal and professional attainments. What is most remarkable about Singer's background is that, theoretically, it appeared most uncondusive to the development of any artistic talent whatsoever and yet it produced three very accomplished authors: Hinde Esther, Joshua and Isaac. I believe that his family's high regard for language is at the core of this achievement. It was a home which, like the third world milieu I come from and teach in (Venezuela), constructed its reality mainly out of words. As such, it was also a world with the inclination toward magic which comes from deifying language

and seeing it as the main tool for the taming and modification of the "real."

Singer's family appears to have been better at producing eminent authors than at providing the proper atmosphere for the unfolding of free, psychologically healthy individuals. Isaac Singer reacted to the restrictions of the home by silently plotting his eventual liberation through his art and through his amorous excesses. Secrecy and transgression became his means of survival, as in his confrontation with the universe of competing males of the story "Growing Up." And he developed a sort of apprehensive devotion (coupled with irresistible attraction) as his response to assertive females, who, like the lion-like Nesika of "The Milk of a Lioness" (and Singer's mother Bathsheba), are awesome and vibrate with deadly powers but are also the dispensers of life in all its beauty and milk-like fluidity.

Because of the enormous struggle involved in becoming an individual and an author, Singer views himself as a species of hero who, as chosen representative of a chosen people, is granted access to, and equality with God. Thus, his protagonists are heroic in the sense that their main confrontation is with a God they perpetually and unsuccessfully seek to humanize. Their search for God is actually a struggle with an enemy they seek to defeat and re-educate.

Singer's protagonists are also heroic in their search for love. They strive to vanquish both nature and society and to attain a nonprocreative, noninstitutionalized, ideal relationship between men and women. There is a hint of what the heroes desire in the story "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw" and it appears to be a relationship of equality, camaraderie, adventure, and learning. In this story, only the male is engaged in studying, but in the novel The Slave, it is clear that acquiring knowledge together is one of the main goals of the ideal male-female relationship Singer's fiction pursues.

In Asa Heshel, the protagonist of The Family Moskat and prototype of all Singer's heroes, the idealism concerning love reaches its logical conclusion. It goes from the private to the collective with Asa's theory which connects mindless reproduction with misery and death and preaches "more sex and fewer children" as the way of solving some of the individual and social problems of humanity.

Asa reappears as Yasha Mazur in The Magician of Lublin, where he is stripped of his scholarship and rabbinical lineage to be granted the liberty of indulging in magic: a secular way of competing with the God the heroes claim to be searching for and of trying to attain beyond the human both professionally and personally. Magic is the expedient of the childlike and of the desperate. Like a baby in the omnipotent stage of development who believes, after his crying is repeatedly followed by the appearance of the breast or bottle, that he

has succeeded in conjuring up these objects, Yasha the magician has a certain faith in his ability to bend the world to his purpose, and he feels sure of his dexterity in gaining love from numerous women and in juggling his affairs with them successfully. But Yasha overreaches: he juggles too many balls in the air, and they all collapse. Feeling embittered and guilty, he retreats. That Singer/Yasha turned to magic in his attempts to gain his objectives is a sign of desperation, of giving up on reality as a feasible way of fulfilling the deepest and highest needs.

However, magic is also the resort of those who trust the way the world responds to them, and who believe that, within reason, fantasy and illusion are the beginning of all science and of all advance.

Yasha/Singer appears lucid about the pros and cons of his profession but he is plagued by his tendency to go to extremes. He cannot stay "within reason." Instead, his life is an exercise in excess and hyperbole. Because of this it makes delightful reading but is doomed to fail as a search for any ideal. The book is more Singer's personal catharsis than anything else; an attempt to exorcise the author's own omnipotence as illustrated in the childhood fantasies he has been unable to renounce. The omnipotence is clear in Yasha, as is its obverse, impotence. The violent and glittering swerve from one to the other makes this the most exciting of all of Singer's books. As catharsis the book was effective because,

as I noted above, the closest Singer came to portraying ideal love in his fiction was in The Slave, which was written immediately after The Magician of Lublin.

Yasha's failure is a failure of personality. In Singer's work a person's worst enemy is generally within and his novel Enemies resumes the search for God and love with a cast of characters who recognize this but are not able to benefit much from their knowledge. Herman Broder, the protagonist, recovers the rabbinical upbringing and the scholarship which characterize Asa and Jacob, and resembles them more than he does Yasha. Herman still shares a few fantasies with Yasha but his stance toward the world is very different. Instead of aggressively projecting himself into the world as Yasha does, Herman seeks to hide from it. His life is a journey of avoidance and evasion. Marriage and reproduction are only two of the things he wishes to avoid, and he reiterates some of Asa Heshel's ideas and positions in this regard.

Singer's determination to attain his idealistic objectives is demonstrated by the fact that the search for love filters into his children's stories. "Menashe and Rachel" is a good example of that. The imaginative leap into adulthood the children make in order to fulfill their desires is reversed in the novel Shosha, where the author and his protagonist return to childhood in search not just of love but also of creativity. Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, Aaron Greidinger, through the scholarly issue of a rabbinical

home, resembles the uneducated Yasha Mazur more than he does Asa, Jacob or Herman. The resemblance is most noticeable in his fantasies, which are as grandiose as anything Yasha ever came up with.

If Shosha had been Singer's last novel, he would have retained the prominence and high regard that won him the Nobel Prize in 1978, and one would be able to assert that the search had never abated or been distorted but, on the contrary, was still being conducted with the insistence bordering on obstinacy with which children play their favorite games. As it is, one can almost say that, but not quite. His final novels, The Penitent and Scum, are works of bitterness and disillusionment and somewhat mar the entire opus. But only somewhat.

CHAPTER II

THE APPEAL AND IMPORTANCE OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Isaac Bashevis Singer is a writer who should not have reached wide audiences. He wrote in Yiddish, a language which is dying, about the world of Polish Jews which was destroyed during the Second World War. He sprinkles his books with a profusion of Talmudic knowledge unfamiliar to most readers, and populates some of his supposedly realistic fiction with supernatural creatures the modern, rational mind would normally find unacceptable. Yet he is read with pleasure by millions all over the world. Singer's work is popular because it satisfies universal human longings by being deceptively simple, aesthetically pleasing, and highly sensuous.

While writing about his fellow Jews, Singer depicts our common humanity very poignantly and he speaks directly to our human condition. Marcia Allentuck comments that he does this through his "enigmatic treatments of the titled paradoxes and grotesqueries inherent in the conflicts between divine promise and experiential reality, redemption and history, religion and secularism, tradition and modernism, eroticism and self-

discipline."¹ In this manner, Singer transforms the heavy fare of modern Jewish history into novels and stories which make us feel at the very brink of being able to apprehend the mysteries of human nature and of life. The people that he brings into being are so well-drawn that they elicit a surge of recognition in most readers. His characters enjoy the privilege of the special slowmotionness of art, which allows them to display their emotions and feelings in all their monumental intensity and import. In Singer's work, there is no suspension of reality, for life is presented in all its vexing complexity, but there is a diminution of speed; events and emotions unfold in a stately manner, creating a similarly leisurely reflective state of mind in the reader. Time seems to be elongated as we receive the meticulously detailed descriptions, register every compellingly conveyed nuance or overflowing passion, and allow the proper response to swell unimpeded in our minds and hearts.

In paradoxical reaction to this decrease in speed, I liken the majority of Singer's novels and short stories to a spinning top, the toy that figures so prominently in his stories for children. For like a dreidel, his work is almost archetypical in its combination of simplicity and universality. Tops are sensuously powerful and, when one releases them, they are like things propelled by the self's

¹Marcia Allentuck, ed. The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) p.xiii

psychic powers to dance one's will upon the world. A dreidel rotates around its own axle, and in a wider circle around the available space, regaling the eye with enchanting combinations of colors and of letters. Similarly, Singer's work is recognizably the product of a well-differentiated individual exercising his very strong will and, at the same time, his work provides the reader with the exhilarating sensation of swirling tightly around his or her own self, while also taking a promenade, in ever widening circles, around the experiences and lives of others: holding one's breath in magical expectancy of something very new and very familiar all at once.

Though the beauty and sensuousness of Singer's work are its own best justification, these attributes--because they assure wide-readership--also lend his fiction its strength as a link among people of varied religious and cultural backgrounds and make his oeuvre humanistically important.

The exiled Russian poet Joseph Brodsky writes:

Since there is not much on which to rest our hopes for a better world, since everything else seems to fail one way or another, we must somehow maintain that literature is the only form of moral insurance a society has; it is the permanent antidote to the dog-eat-dog principles; that it provides the best argument against any sort of bulldozer-type mass solution--if only because human diversity is literature's lock and stock, as well as its *raison d'être*.²

²Joseph Brodsky, "The Condition We Call Exile," The New York Review of Books, Jan. 1988: XXXIV # 21-22, p.17.

As a Russian who found it impossible to discard his individuality and conform to the dictates of his country's totalitarian system of government, Joseph Brodsky regards literature as nothing less than a "moral insurance" because, since literature deals with human diversity, it cannot help but make it more difficult for any system or any nation to impose solutions that do not take into account cultural, ethnic, and individual differences.

Brodsky's ideas about literature assign the author a function with which Isaac Bashevis Singer completely disagrees. Singer believes that it is not for the writer of fiction to be a spiritual and moral leader. "I don't think a fiction writer has this duty and has this power."³ But he also says: "I am not ashamed to admit that I belong to those who fantasize that literature is capable of bringing new horizons and perspectives--philosophical, religious, aesthetical, and even social."⁴ Like most of us, Singer thinks one thing and fantasizes another. His work, however, appears to be more in accord with the fantasy than with the thinking and he does bring "new horizons and perspectives" perhaps precisely because he does not purposefully set out to do so. The humanistic power of Singer's work derives mainly from its

³Paul Rosenblatt and Gene Koppel, On Literature and Life: An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1971), p.10.

⁴Isaac Bashevis Singer, Nobel Lecture (New York: Farrar Straus, 1978), p. 5.

impartial and affectionate depiction of a vanished people, his unapologetic utilization of fantasy and literature as aids in his struggle for individual differentiation and development, and his belief in the potency of language.

Singer did not seem to have felt that his people and their history needed the services of a cosmetic artist who would conceal their flaws and emphasize their virtues. Alfred Kazin observes that "Singer swims happily in the whole ancient and modern tradition of the Jews--Jews are his life but he would certainly agree with Mark Twain's reply to anti-Semites: 'Jews are members of the human race; worse than that I cannot say of them.'"⁵ Singer's success is partially due to a similar view of his people as simply human and to his refusal to write for the purpose of propagandizing them. He is so unbiased that some critics mildly disapprove and even believe that "it is safe to assume that a passionate interest in things Jewish and in the tragic course of Jewish history"⁶ is not among the reasons why Singer attracts so many modern readers. Although it may be true that Singer's greatest popularity with sophisticated readers in the USA derives from his "modernist" short stories, it is "things Jewish and . . . the tragic course of Jewish history" (Alexander xii) as presented in the

⁵Alfred Kazin, "Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Mind of God," Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) p.151.

⁶Edward Alexander, Isaac Bashevis Singer; A Study of the Short Fiction (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) p.xii. Hereafter cited as Alexander.

novels which account for his popularity with the masses both in the United States and overseas. And what may make "things Jewish" so attractive to the non-Jewish reader (some Jewish readers may object) is the affectionate candor, the mixture of love and impartiality with which Singer treats his own people.

Singer's first novel Satan in Goray,⁷ published in Warsaw in 1935, for example, emphasizes the horrors of Bogdan Chmelnicki's Cossack invasion of Poland in 1648, but it also goes on to "destroy illusions and satirize the potency of faith by presenting the epoch of Shabbati Zevi in its extreme superstitious grotesqueness: its depression of reason and exaltation of unreality, its asceticism and eroticism."⁸ The novel relentlessly depicts the degradations and tragedies which ensue from an excessive reliance on belief, something Singer's own father engaged in. It shows how, in 1666-67, people in Goray deluded themselves with messianic expectations and abandoned their ordinary lives in order to engage in an emotional orgy which ended in devastating disappointment when they could no longer deny the news of the false Messiah's Shabbati Zevi's conversion to Mohammedanism. In its exploration of the nature of human hope and human vision, the novel unflinchingly demonstrates that "the Messianic hope becomes infinitely more devastating and demoralizing than the

⁷Isaac Bashevis Singer, Satan in Goray Translated by Jacob Sloan (New York: Noonday Press, 1955).

⁸Charles A. Madison, Yiddish Literature; Its Scope and Major Writers (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) p.482.

total despair produced by the savage violence of Chmelnicki and his followers."⁹ In doing so, the novel seems to indict the people who adhered to such hopes, but actually honors and validates them, as all honest explorations tend to do.

Singer is unsentimental not only in his treatment of his group but also in his approach to its individual members. Singer's work has been interpreted as always showing a movement from the individual to the social,¹⁰ and Singer in his interviews frequently championed the religion he did not himself practice, proclaimed his belief in God and in Providence and expressed forcefully his disapproval of assimilation. In spite of this, his characters are free entities who are very likely to do the opposite of what their author preaches. Indeed, it is this powerful delineation of distinct personalities which gives Singer's work its main attraction. Singer's characters happen to have been born Jewish but they are, above all, restless modern men and women who irreverently question everything. Many of them are in such sympathy with the rest of creation that they are natural "assimilationists." They wonder about the cosmos and about science and review different philosophical systems, but they

⁹Edwin Gittleman, "Singer's Apocalyptic Town, Satan in Goray" The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) p. 68.

¹⁰Dorothy Bilik S., Immigrant Survivors: Post Holocaust Consciousness in Recent American Jewish Fiction (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981) p.135.

never reach final, permanent answers. They try to make an art of what they can control--like lovemaking or storytelling--and they can also settle for a conventional life of marrying and bringing up children. They are not just Jews, they are not just Holocaust survivors. They are like the rest of us--no worse and no better. They are beleaguered human beings trying to cope in a bewildering modern world.

The struggle of Singer's characters is the universal one of seeking "to triumph over the adversities of nature and the perversities of culture."¹¹ Singer's protagonists are lustful individuals who nevertheless find it difficult to acknowledge the lessons of their senses and, like their author, end up having one set of values to live by and a different set to promote. They are imbedded in their own particular social and historical context, but their developmental process generally "involves a decisive movement of alienation from the folk and its ways"¹² because they are examples of the immanence of the opposite in everything human.

Although they value and need their group, they also chafe under the strictures of their religion and, like most of us, want to liberate their perceptions and their actions from the

¹¹Louis Wirth, preface, Ideology and Utopia, by Karl Mannheim (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1936.) p.xii.

¹²Hochman Baruch, "Isaac Bashevis Singer's Vision of Good and Evil," in Critical Views of I. B. Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.123.

shackles of the very culture that inspires and sustains them.

The Family Moskat¹³ is a novel which deals with this tension between individual and group, which reached a climatic point in the confrontation between the Haskalah and Hasidism in the eighteenth century. To a certain extent, the leading characters of this novel are Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), the remarkable hunchback who almost single-handedly, and "with a swiftness which defies belief, [transformed] the status, life, style, and world of the German Jew,"¹⁴ and Israel ben Elzier (c.1700-60), the founder of Hasidism. The Family Moskat is, among other things, a charting of the ways in which the goals of Jewish cultural accommodation with the modern world pursued by the Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment, clash continuously with Hasidic otherworldliness, separatism, and with the Hasidic desire to live outside of time (in an unchangeable past) and their belief in approaching God through simplicity, joy, and deep emotions. The novel reflects the tragic way in which the movements were interpreted as irreconcilable. In a way, its entire theme is summarized in the imaginary exchange between Jekuthiel, Tereshpol Minor's enlightened watchmaker, and the town's rabbi, Reb Dan Katzenellenbogen, after all Jews

¹³Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Family Moskat (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1950). Hereafter cited as Moskat.

¹⁴Sol Gittleman, From Shtetl to Suburbia; The Family in Jewish Literary Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) p.28.

are ordered to leave town. Jekuthiel is presumed to be saying to the rabbi: "Where is your Lord of the Universe now? Where are his miracles? Where is your faith in Torah and prayer?" The rabbi mentally answers: "Where are your worldly remedies? Where is your trust in the gentiles? What have you accomplished by aping Esau?" (Moskat 259-260).

That the upsurge of intellectual and financial achievement initiated by Mendelssohn came to be seen as (and in some cases came to be) an aping of the enemy is the malaise that permeates the novel and plagues its characters. The Polish Jews of The Family Moskat, who owe their educational and financial advantages to the impressive transformations of the Enlightenment, decry the process of which they are a product and live in fear of losing their cultural and religious identity. To prevent this loss, they furiously attempt to hold on to their Hasidic ways, but find themselves incapable of forfeiting the individual autonomy to which they have become accustomed. They can neither partake of the ecstasy of merging with their group nor stand alone and use their freedom constructively. Murray Baumgarten has observed that Jewish characters like these have been trained to feel that "to have a self and be an individual and thereby have the capacity to choose, is the great scandal and secret of their expulsion from the communal garden."¹⁵ They experience shame

¹⁵Murray Baumgarten, "Clothing and Character," Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) p.97.

and guilt which, as it frequently seems to happen with the newly emancipated, cause them passionately to engage in negative action. Having been trained to regard individual will as inimical to the group, they exercise it to the detriment of their own lives. Thus Asa Heshel Bannet squanders his possibilities of a formal education and almost purposely bungles the affair with Hadassah, Adele insists on knowingly marrying a man who does not love her, Hadassah willingly consents to her own victimization in an arranged marriage, and Abram careens through life in compulsive and self-destructive pursuit of pleasure.

Irving Howe says that "Singer's ultimate concern is not with the collective experience of a chosen or martyred people but with the enigmas of personal fate."¹⁶ In enacting the basic conflict of personal identity and destiny posited by the Haskalah/Hasidism confrontation, this novel emphasizes the difficulties involved in renouncing the Hasidic identity, which is a meticulously prescribed and unalterable product, to adopt the enlightenment identity, which is a process of growth and change highly affected by individual choice. The characters have lost their faith in one system but are saddled with its mental habits and afflicted with fatalism regarding their ability to stand alone and to direct their own development.

¹⁶Irving Howe, "I. B. Singer," Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.110.

The predicament of the characters in this novel is figured through costumes and mirrors. The characters adopt changes of attire in their attempts to construct new identities and then, purposely or accidentally, check these changes against mirrors. Invariably, the mirrors' revelations are interpreted as proof of the power of attire to transform an individual not just outwardly but also inwardly.

The basic psychological fragility that is revealed by this belief in the power of costume to determine personality is exemplified by Hadassah, who is modern but cannot prevent herself from experimenting with the uniform and role of a pious Jewish matron. Hadassah's modernity, her being a product of the enlightenment, is emphasized by the fact that she both develops and expresses her individuality by communing, not with her religious group, but with her diary. Because she is an individualist, her main connection is with her evolving self, and her holy book is one of her own creation, a written self with whom the writing self converses. She is emancipated enough from Hasidic ways and sufficiently interested in the world to choose a gentile as her best friend. She is daring enough to risk running away to Switzerland with Asa Heshel. However, when the elopement fails and she loses track of Asa, she succumbs to despair and becomes fatalistic. She hands herself over to the group, thus transforming the group's loving desire to embrace and incorporate her into an act of self-victimization. By being untrue to herself, to her

individual desires, she is untrue to the group and to the husband who is perhaps the best integrated and noblest individual in the narrative. Unable to live up to the best in herself and to the best her group has to offer, she shuns individual responsibility and contrives to make the group responsible for her own degradation. She renounces her diary, which she considers too pure after her self-betrayal, and on adopting her matron's wig says to herself: "well, I'll wear it, just as though it were my cross"(p.211). Her language conflates the two religions of her native Poland into a single indictment.

Hadassah is only one of the many characters who does not succeed at developing a comfortable accommodation between modernism and Hasidism. For The Family Moskat is not a manual on how to deal with difficult times but, like a great deal of Singer's novels, it is a novel which, "like most of the great constructs of Western thought is inherently dualistic. [It depicts a situation of] antinomy which presumes some form of socioreligious determinism, while insisting upon the existential will of the individual."¹⁷

Singer's insistence on individuality in the modern sense, manifested most commonly in his creation of glamorous and vibrant characters whose emotional intensity he refuses to

¹⁷Max F. Schulz, "Isaac Bashevis Singer, Radical Sophistication, and the Jewish-American Novel," Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p. 146.

attenuate, accounts for a good part of his work's attraction. So does the fact that, as soon as one reads any of Singer's autobiographical pieces or books, it becomes clear that through all his writing, Singer, in addition to creating art, is also building, enlarging and revising his own self (thus by implication making self-building an art form) to the point that, at times, it is difficult to distinguish between his fiction and his fact, between the universe created by his words and the reality of his life.

To better accommodate all of his longings and curiosities, Singer tried a variety of genres and explored the realm of the supernatural. Displaying a shade of what Freud hints is a natural human grudge against monotheism,¹⁸ Singer adopted the supernatural as a sort of polytheism (a modification and expansion of Hasidic belief in demons, goblins and the like) in his desire to create more avenues for the development of his art. The supernatural realm, which he called the "higher powers," represented the highest reaches of the imagination, the territory of wishes made words but not yet substance. For Singer had "an almost superstitious conviction [in the power and] permanence of words" (Alexander 25), and through them, he maintained his belief in the idea that fiction (as well as fantasy, wishes, dybbuks and goblins) could eventually be.

¹⁸Sigmund Freud, Moses and Monotheism (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) p.117.

Singer's belief in the powers of the word is very unfashionable nowadays. Subjected to the tenets derived from Foucault's and Derrida's work, we concentrate on the opacity of language (and on the supposed invincibility of structures designed to subject us) and abdicate our powers as its manipulators (ignoring the fact that Foucault and Derrida are clear examples of individuals using language very much to their personal advantage and prestige), willingly renouncing our freedom, capacity, and responsibility to put language at the service of the human spirit. Singer, fortunately, realized early that, in his desires to assert his strength, "his [best] weapon [was] not violent social coercion but language."¹⁹ In imitation of his Hebrew God, who as Feuerbach says created a world which was "the product of a dictatorial word, of a categorical imperative, of a magic fiat,"²⁰ Singer makes himself by dint of language and the exercise of the magic-enamored imagination. He also uses language confidently and unapologetically to portray the grandiose aspirations and common human limitations which link us as well as the individual quirks and peculiarities which make each one of us unique.

¹⁹Steven David Lavine, "Rhetoric for the Spirit," Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1986) p.129.

²⁰Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) p.115.

Singer's work lives up to the double meaning of the word "sapience." It is imbued with knowledge and wisdom, and it has very good "taste." Because most of his work is not in the least didactic, it is very useful both socially and individually. It is a sort of "medicine of cherries,"²¹ so intriguingly flavored that it can be consumed with pleasure by readers who may be extremely different from the people the work depicts. This is why it can so effectively serve, in Brodsky's words, as "moral insurance," and be an "antidote to the dog-eat-dog principle."

²¹Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry" in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, Inc.; 1971) pp.155-177.

CHAPTER III

TO BECOME IS TO TRANSGRESS

Sinfully Building the Self: The Memoirs.

Fiddle around, if you must
fiddle, but never with ways to
keep things the same, no matter
who, not even yourself.
Heaven, somewhere ahead, has
got to be a change.

Lewis Thomas¹

Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote journalism, family sagas, novels centered around amorous philosophers who zestfully search for personal answers, short stories, memoirs, and children's books. The boundary between one genre and another is very permeable in his work, and he crosses this boundary at will with refreshing unself-consciousness.² Singer's family

¹Lewis Thomas "On Cloning a Human Being," A Long Line of Cells (New York: Book of the Month Club, 1990) p.145.

²David Neal Miller, Fear of Fiction: Narrative Strategies in the Works of Isaac Bashevis Singer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985). Miller devotes an entire book to an examination of the ways in which Singer blurs genre distinctions, to the manner in which he fictionalizes the factual and historicizes the imaginative, thus undermining the reader's expectations. Even though I am now operating in my "literary critic" mode (which I consider very different from my "enthusiastic reader" mode), I would find it very difficult to use verbs like "blur" and "undermine" to describe what Singer is doing. I had come up with the idea of Singer's

sagas are, to some extent, fictionalized memoirs, and his memoirs are sagas of his own family. The short stories are records of the realistic and supernatural (psychological) experiences of the author and his people, and many of them are virtually indistinguishable in content from the memoirs. The children's stories, although some are composed with obvious moral/educational purposes in mind, hark back to the memoirs and seem to complement them.

Isaac Bashevis Singer admitted that all his books were about him, that they were all himself.³ Although one should be skeptical about such avowals,⁴ Singer and his work do appear to be meshed. David Neal Miller has observed regarding Singer's interviews that "insistent intertextualities . . .

"unself-conscious crossing" of "permeable boundaries" before reading Miller's wonderful little book, and I quote him to lend support to my much less sophisticated (because more positive?) view of the phenomenon. Hereafter cited as Fear of Fiction.

³Richard Burgin, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1985) p.72. Singer tells Burgin: "All my books are about me. They are myself." Hereafter cited as Burgin.

⁴David Neal Miller (1985) is particularly skeptical about Singer's interviews. He claims that Singer manipulates "his interviewers to his own ends and . . . is rather more inclined to answer questions about himself than about his works. Withal, there is little doubt that Singer, and not his interviewers, is the controlling intellect and, as it were, author of his many interviews" p.105. And he adds, later on, that "Singer offers [his] interviews not as biographical documents but as literary texts--that is, as utterances not dependent upon a reconstruction of their original instrumental contexts for proper apprehension" p.113.

undermine the discreteness of any given interview and encourage the reader to view it as a segment of a single, far larger, and yet unfinished work" (Fear of Fiction 113). This "unfinished work" could be said to be Singer's own life. If we take this to be so, we will be compelled to acknowledge that the man that is revealed in the totality of Singer's works is a fascinating individual who is passionately engaged in trying not to keep things the same. Singer's main characteristic is an insatiable appetite for change, for experience, for self-expression, and for life.⁵ Professionally, Singer has experimented with a variety of genres in his resolve to live life to its utmost. Singer bounces across his opus, "half frightened at [his] own appearance," at the "frenzied eagerness which [shines] from [his] blue eyes," but determined to try everything.⁶ Once called by a prominent critic a master

⁵Susan Sontag, "Demons and Dreams," Partisan Review (Summer 1962) 5, p. 462. Singer's extraordinary power of sensuous evocation has been praised by Sontag, and she refers to Singer's fictional world as one "whose moving principle is appetite, whether the appetite for learning and salvation or for warm flesh and succulent foods and fine clothes and furnishings, and in this respect most deeply removed from the world of modern fiction whose principal subject is the failure of appetite and passionate feeling." See also Paddy Chayefsky, "Of Dybbuks and Devilkins," Reporter (April 22, 1965) p.41. He observes that Singer's characters are ravenous in their approach to the world and that they are so passionate in their emotions and wants that "Singer must exploit the supernatural to make them comprehensible."

⁶Isaac Bashevis Singer, Stories for Children (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984) p. 223. Hereafter cited as Stories.

of metamorphoses,⁷ Singer has had three names and three personas in his literary career--Isaac Warshafsky, Isaac Bashevis, and D. Segal⁸--and has adopted many other personalities (including some supernatural ones) in his novels, short stories and children's books. The Isaac Bashevis Singer who produces all these works is only one of his many personalities, and it is the one we can most readily trace back to the little boy and young man who make the memoirs so ebullient.

Even the most cursory reading of Singer's autobiographical pieces cannot help but detect the enormous vitality that characterizes them. Born in a home where money was always short and religious strictures unavoidable, young Isaac Singer (as reported by the adult author) managed to lead

⁷Harold Bloom, "Isaac Bashevis Singer's Jeremiad," rev. of The Penitent, by I. B. Singer, New York Time Book Review 25 Sept. 1983: 3, 26-27. Bloom scornfully calls Singer "a master of metamorphoses" and angrily declares that The Penitent is a tirade against humanism, liberalism, the American judicial system, etc. in a jeremiad which "has no surprises, no wit, and little variety" p.26. It is hard to disagree, and it is equally hard to account for the poor quality of the work, except perhaps in terms of the author's personal need to "enact" certain things in his work, regardless of the professional consequences.

⁸Leslie Fielder, "Isaac Bashevis Singer; Or, the American-ness of the American Jewish Writer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82: 124-131. Fielder reminds us that Singer has created for himself two additional names and personas: the name "Isaac Warshafsky" under which he signs his contributions to The Daily Forward, and the name "Isaac Bashevis," in honor of his mother Bathsheba, to sign his full-length books in Yiddish and in English. David Neal Miller points out in Fear of Fiction that Singer also wrote under the pseudonym "D. Segal" at least until the early 1960s. p. 71.

a rather normal and relatively unrestricted and joyful childhood. Throughout In My Father's Court,⁹ there is evidence of a child's bursting with energy and self-direction. In "A Day of Pleasures," for example, Isaac sets out to spend a ruble he has earned helping to resolve a litigation at his father's court, and undergoes a series of delightful adventures in which his clear perception of the adults around him and his independence and willfulness are evident. Following a pattern that partially foreshadows the author's adult behavior, young Isaac launches his search for pleasure by evading parental authority and supervision, temporarily fleeing his original community to seek a place where he can "afford to act the profligate" (Father's Court 109), overindulging in sensuous pleasures, and modifying reality with his fantasies to produce what are normally called lies by adults. In short, Isaac escapes before his parents can claim possession of his ruble and takes a droshky ride into an unfamiliar neighborhood where he gorges himself with sweets. On the way back home, he declares himself a sick orphan (with the help of one of those adults who specialize in eagerly looking for just such dramas to sympathize with) and invents, for another boy, a story of having gone to Prague to visit an aunt.

⁹Isaac Bashevis Singer, In My Father's Court Trans. Channah Kleinerman-Golstein, Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1966). Hereafter cited as Father's Court.

Isaac's inventiveness scared him; his fantasies seemed so uncontainable that they made him fear that he was actually crazy (Stories 223). He told his childhood friend Shosha that his father was a king. He also claimed that from the cabala he had learned "holy names of God that when uttered could allow one to fly like a bird and become invisible," and that he could, if he chose to, become King of Jerusalem.¹⁰

But Isaac's life was not restricted just to fabulous imaginings. Already incapable of settling only for his family's religion and culture, he was supplementing his fantasies with more concrete experiences and admitted to existing on several different levels: "I studied the cabala and I went down to play hide-and-seek with the boys in the courtyard. . . . I read Dostoesvski in Yiddish translation" (Love and 17). Isaac's "urge to know what the unbelievers or the scientists had to say grew even stronger" (Love and 20). He was interested in everything.

Bursting as they are with "lies," questions, and fantasies, Singer's autobiographical pieces pulsate with the child's irrepressible drive toward the unfolding of his own distinctive individuality and talents; Isaac truly seems under the sway of what psychologists term "the evolutionary constructive force," which urges human beings "to develop

¹⁰Isaac Bashevis Singer, Love and Exile (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1984) p.xxvii. Hereafter cited as Love and.

[their] given potentialities."¹¹ But the almost frenetic person we envision through these works, this trespasser of genres who later accomplished so many transmigrations and rehearsed so many diverse lives, did not find it easy to preserve his vitality and to protect his vocation. Singer came from a rabbinical home committed to the production of meek Talmudic scholars. In this milieu, everything outside the strictures of Hasidism was considered "tref," unclean, and the choices were very limited.¹² In fact, there were only two choices: one was either a pious Jew or an irreclaimable sinner. The society Singer's parents represented was one which was interested in producing individuals who could "deal with life by adaptation, not by innovation,"¹³ and to this end, the "culture control[led] behavior minutely and . . . provide[d] ritual, routine and religion to occupy and orient everyone" (Riesman p. 26).

Isaac's father, Pinchos Mendel, was a Hasidic Jew who "knew of nothing but service to God, he spoke no Polish or

¹¹Bernard Paris, ed., Third Force Psychology and the Study of Literature (London and Toronto: University Presses, 1986) p.11.

¹²H.R. Wolf, "Singer's Children Stories and In My Father's Court: Universalism and the Rankian Hero," The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969). Wolf shows that Singer used universal fantasies as a way of broadening the atmosphere of "moral encapsulation" in which he grew up. Hereafter cited as Wolf.

¹³David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1950) p.25. Hereafter cited as Riesman.

Russian, and could not even write his address in the gentile script. Outside the Torah and prayer, the world was full of evil spirits, demons and goblins" (Father's Court 50). Pinchos Mendel was extremely unworldly, would never look at women, and had a concern for the purity of his soul which "sprang from his ardent hope that one day he would be able to perform miracles."¹⁴

Isaac's mother, Bathsheba, "might almost have been the model for Isaac's Yentel, for [she] was something of a scholar. She was self-taught in both the Hebrew language and the reading of holy books, [and] is said to have known the entire Jewish Bible practically by heart" (Kresh 19). Although she was "the daughter of an opponent of Hasidism and had inherited some of her father's causticness" (Father's Court 58), she chose to marry the mystically oriented Pinchos Mendel, instead of the son of a wealthy Lublin family, because Pinchos was the better scholar of the two (Father's Court 50).

So the home in which Singer and his siblings grew up was one "where religion, Jewishness, was virtually the air that [they] breathed. . . . Jewishness was not some diluted formal religion but one that contained all the flavors, all the vitamins, the entire mysticism of faith . . . the coming of the Messiah was taken almost literally" (Love and 3). Growth was rigidly defined and circumscribed in this type of home,

¹⁴Paul Kresh, The Magician of 86th Street (New York: The Dial Press, 1979) p.18. Hereafter cited as Kresh.

and the children had only two roles available to them: girls were expected to become pious Jewish matrons and boys could only be rabbis.

However, children are very proficient at disappointing their parents' hopes for exact replication and at pursuing, with what must seem to their elders perverse vitality and single-mindedness, their own development and differentiation, and this is exactly what occurred in Singer's home. Although Pinchos and Bathsheba appeared to have enforced religious and cultural values with affection, and largely through direct example, the three children--Hinde Esther, Joshua and Isaac--all staged their own rebellions against a situation which they perceived as too restrictive. Throughout Singer's memoirs we get glimpses of the determination with which, not only young Isaac but also his older sister and older brother sought to achieve their personal and professional growth. And we are acquainted with the manner in which all three of them attempted to write their way out of the world in which they were born, refusing, through the assertive appropriation of language, to be mere cogs in the machinery for the production of more Polish Hasidic Jews living in poverty, backwardness, and passive expectancy of their own destruction by Hitler. The times were propitious for their endeavors, for the Singer children were heirs of the literary revival which began at the end of the nineteenth century when "the hold of religion had begun to decline, . . . the idea of nationality had not yet

reached its full power, [and] Yiddish literature [had become] the central means of collective expression for the East European Jews, fulfilling some of the functions of both religion and the idea of nationality."¹⁵

The first Singer to reach for a nonreligious way of expression was Hinde Esther. She was born in Bilgoray on March 31, 1891, was thirteen years older than Isaac, and what is known about her life is enough to cause one to recoil in horror from all rigid, hierarchical systems of value. Hinde's first offense was to have been born a girl. Her mother, Bathsheba, still in her teens and a well-indoctrinated Jew, disappointed that her firstborn was not a boy, rejected the baby and sent her to spend the first years of her life with a wet-nurse, where the baby slept in a crib under a table.¹⁶ Later, Hinde's relationship with her rejecting mother was understandably strained and, though she was well-loved by her father, it was clear that, as girl, nothing could be expected of her but that she eventually become a good Jewish matron and mother of sons.

Miraculously, Hinde Esther managed to become an author. This was probably due to the richness of the home as a place

¹⁵Irving Howe, "Introduction to Yiddish Literature," Breakthrough: A Treasure of Contemporary American Jewish Literature ed. Irving Malin and Irwin Stark (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965) p. 280.

¹⁶Clive Sinclair, The Brother's Singer (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1983) p. 11. Hereafter cited as Sinclair.

in which language was highly valued and used with relish. For, as Clive Sinclair says; "Bathsheba's sharp tongue and Pinchos Mendel's turn of phrase were a greater inspiration to Esther, Joshua and Bashevis than their piety" (p.12). Gratifyingly, instead of allowing the parents' masterful handling of speech to befuddle them, all three children appropriated language as their tool for increasing their knowledge and advancing their freedom. They turned writing into the magic wand which allowed them to conjure up their own personal histories. Hinde Esther Kreitman (her married name) was the pioneer in this splendid deviation from the original culture of the home. She wrote a romance called Diamonds and a book of short stories, neither of which was translated. She also wrote the autobiographical novel Deborah, which was translated by her son, Morris Kreitman.

Hinde Esther's desire for a different life surfaced early and did not contribute to her happiness at her parents' home. She read Yiddish newspapers and books, walked with her friends in the Saxony Gardens, and dreamt of romance, but was eventually constrained into an arranged marriage (Father's Court 147). Predictably, and justifiably, she felt that she was being sent away because of her mother's dislike for her (Father's Court 149). But there was nothing she could do, and she eventually married a diamond cutter who lived in Antwerp, who was willing to take her even though she had no dowry.

Joshua, who was born on November 30, 1893, also in Bilgoray, was a great deal more successful in his attempts to break away from the Orthodox prescriptions of the home. He started to confront his father very early and was accused by him of being an unbeliever and an enemy of Judaism (Father's Court 197). While still very young, Joshua had discovered that "the world was no pit of iniquity riddled with the vanity of vanities but an incredibly beautiful place abounding in indescribable joys."¹⁷ He was not inclined to meekness and complained about his fellow Hasidic Jews in very bitter terms: "you can see what Jews look like--stooped, despondent, living in filth. Watch them drag their feet as they walk. . . Listen to them speak. It is no wonder everyone thinks of them as Asiatics" (Father's Court 197). He moved away from the parental home, had an unsuccessful start as a painter, and then became a famous writer. He wrote and published Steel and Iron, Blood Harvest, Yoshe Kalb, The Brothers Ashkenazi, East of Eden, The Family Carnovsky, Of a World That Is No More, and The River Breaks Up. Hewas hired by Abraham Cahan as a Polish correspondent for the Yiddish newspaper The Daily Forward, came to live in the United States in 1933, and had Isaac join him in 1935.

Like the third child of the traditional folk tale, Isaac, born in Leoncin on July 14, 1904, was fated to benefit greatly

¹⁷Israel Joshua Singer, Of a World That Is No More (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1970) p. 37. Hereafter cited as Of a World.

from his position in the family. Both older siblings, but particularly Joshua, were proficient handlers of language and were interested in worldly knowledge and literature, thus creating the appropriate atmosphere for their younger brother and providing the secular books Isaac needed to placate his ravenous intellectual appetite. Isaac read and experimented with his own writing, while at the same time keeping an observant eye on the home situation, in apparent search for his own developmental strategies. Watching Hinde Esther's ineffectual rebellion may have persuaded Isaac of the futility of such action. But as a male, Israel Joshua was able to succeed, thus indicating that Isaac could also do so.

However, Isaac did not choose open rebellion as a way of attaining his objectives. Perhaps it was no longer necessary after the slow erosion of parental authority effected by Hinde and Joshua. Or perhaps rebellion seemed cruel to Isaac in view of the violent and debilitating intrusion of history in the home via anti-Semitism, economic problems, and war. Or, more likely, Isaac scorned to use a strategy already worn thin by his closest predecessor, his brother Joshua. For as Ruth Wisse remarks, "in order to step out on his own, Bashevis had not only to reject the assumptions of his parents, but also those of his brother who was intimidatingly talented."¹⁸ In other

¹⁸Ruth R. Wisse, "Singer's Paradoxical Progress," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82):151

words, perhaps it was a domestic, but also professional, case of the "anxiety of influence."

There are some hints of Isaac's conflicts with Joshua and other male competitors in the story "Growing Up." The protagonist of "Growing Up"¹⁹ is an eleven-year-old boy who is being raised in an atmosphere of "enclosure and moral encapsulation" (Wolf 157). He tries to move out of this enclosure through "pan-cultural fantasies [which] are irrepressible, [and can help] an imaginative child, no matter how isolated, . . . find in himself a larger world, [and] universalize his experience" (Wolf 157). The most important universalizing fantasy in "Growing Up" is a fairy tale the young child wishes to write. It concerns an eleven-year-old hero named Haiml, who is to save the wealthy heroine, Rebecca, from a monster who is holding her prisoner. Rebecca is engaged to Ben Zion, who is about her age, but Isaac\Haiml is also in love with her, and he is the one with the role of saving her from the monster.

Like all fairy tales, this little fantasy seeks to arrive at a satisfactory end in which the protagonists marry and live happily ever after. But contrary to the tradition, the resolution of the fairy tale within "Growing Up" occurs without the participation of a fairy godparent. The story lacks the normal splitting of a parent into a facilitator (a

¹⁹Isaac Bashevis Singer, Stories for Children (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984) pp.217-230.

fairy godmother or father) and an impeder. Instead, there is a splitting of another figure. In this story, the hero is split into the eleven-year-old Haiml and the sixteen-year-old Ben Zion. Enchantingly, and very touchingly, Isaac's efforts to achieve his purpose in this unconventional manner come to naught. He has gotten himself into an amusing predicament. The author/hero, Isaac/Haiml, is in love with the heroine Rebecca, but the exigencies of the tale require that she marry Ben Zion, who is her fiancé, and is closer to her in age. As Isaac puts it, "somehow my creative juices dried up at this point and I couldn't continue the thread of the story" (Stories 222).

Singer was painfully familiar with the horrors of having his creative juices run dry. He suffered from writer's block when he first came to the United States in 1935. In Lost in America, he attributed his problems to the dislocation caused by moving to a new country. "My coming to America has demoted me in a way, thrown me back to the ordeal of a beginner in writing, in love, in my struggle for independence. I had a taste of what it would be for someone to be born old and to grow younger with the years instead of older, diminishing constantly in rank, in experience, in courage, in wisdom of maturity." ²⁰ But the fact that Isaac's older brother,

²⁰Isaac Bashevis Singer, Lost in America Illustrated by Raphael Soyer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976) p. 140. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically using the complete title.

Joshua, was already a successful writer and was trying to launch Isaac's writing career seemed to have aggravated Isaac's block: "A strange force within me, a literary dybbuk, was sabotaging my efforts. I tried to overcome my enemy, but he outwitted me with his tricks. The moment I began writing, a sleepiness would come over me" (Lost in America 270-71). This may have happened because Isaac deferred to his older brother. "[Joshua] was not only my brother but my father and master as well. I could never address him first. I always had to wait for him to make the first overture" (Lost in America 120).

A great deal may be made out of this view of the older brother as father, and of the possible conflicts and hostility concealed behind Isaac's excessive deference. For the moment, however, we are interested mainly in the manner in which Isaac's relationship with his older brother is reflected in "Growing Up" and in the fairy tale within it. Certainly, the drying up of the creative juices occurred because Isaac did not create one integrated hero but a split one. In the fairy-tale tradition, the rescuer of the princess is also the one whose good fortune it is to marry her. In Isaac's tale, the rescuer was too young for the heroine and Isaac could not find it in himself to make him a little older. He asked himself, "what prevented me from adding a few years to Haiml?" (Stories 222), and then went on to seek other solutions. Isaac was trying to defer to the other half of the hero, the older Ben

Zion, just as he always deferred to his brother. However, he had no desire to give up the heroine, and because of this he was paralyzed and could not finish the story. Isaac, in the throes of unresolved, and probably unacknowledged, sibling rivalry, was incapable of effecting the fulfillment of his fantasies. Because of the reverence under which he concealed the unresolved conflicts with his brother, the hero ended up without bride and rich father-in-law, and Isaac ended up unable to finish the story which was to initiate his literary career.

But Joshua was not the only male who stood in the way of Isaac's personal and literary fulfillment. In "Growing Up," there is also a visitor, Wolf Bear, an itinerant beggar who effortlessly produces one fascinating tale after another while Isaac and family listen. As though this were not enough, there is an escalation of competition when a sort of duel ensues between Joshua and Wolf Bear. Every time Wolf Bear says something that is not factually correct, Joshua interrupts and calls the old storyteller to task with statements like: "Stones don't grow, Reb Wolf Bear," or, ". . . the earth isn't hollow" (Stories 227-28). Isaac's father intervenes, and angrily asks Joshua not to contradict, telling him that the world is full of wonders and "only God the Almighty knows what happens in other spheres" (Stories 229). Isaac is overcome with the desire to cry, and rushes to his parents' bedroom,

where he suddenly realizes that he is too young to write a book.

This momentary withdrawal from the pursuit of literature may have been caused by the overwhelming increase of competitors and by the hierarchy that was created by Isaac's father. Joshua, who was a competitor, but also a model and a mentor, was openly duelling with Wolf Bear, prompted by a desire to adhere to facts, but also, perhaps, by some envy at the fact that a beggar from a small village could create literature with such obvious ease. Isaac's father sided with Wolf Bear, thus placing Joshua below the old visitor, and then proceeded to close any possible mobility within the hierarchy by placing God at the top.

Throughout his entire life Isaac saw God as his competitor. In his essay "Yes..." he refers to God as "the eternal belle lettrist," a writer forever throwing unsuccessful works into the wastebasket.²¹ And Isaac claims to have created his own ethic of protest--one cannot get more competitive than that--and to be always ready to picket God for His unfairness and cruelty to men and animals (Burgin 115-16). If the mature man could view God as such an opposer, one can imagine that the child would have felt this even more poignantly, and that the young hero of "Growing Up" retreated

²¹Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yes..."Yiddish 6. 2-3, (Summer and Fall 1985): 59.

in anguish because he could not envision success in the midst of so many powerful male competitors.

Singer's reaction to his predecessors, to the adults around him, was to postpone the struggle and to seek refuge and resolution to his problems in dreaming.

The fantastic dreams started, the wild adventures. All the fantasies of the day turned into nocturnal visions. That night I dreamed that I was Rabbi Joseph de la Reina. I uttered God's name and the daughter of the Grand Vizier came flying to me. She looked like a neighbor's daughter, Estherel, who lived in our house on the third floor. In the dream, I asked Estherel, "What shall we do? And she replied, "I will become your bride."
(Stories pp. 229-230)

In his dreams, Isaac finally succeeded. He formulated the question which solved his romantic problems and resulted in a proposal of love and marriage. The dreams also helped him overcome the sense of insignificance which had hindered both his love life and his literary aspirations. In his dreams, Isaac became a rabbi of great repute who hugely surpassed his father. And his fantasies were more fabulous, by far, than anything Wolf Bear had ever come up with. Most importantly, in the dreams, God was just a name he uttered to make his wishes come true. Isaac even managed to integrate reality into his extravagant catalog of desires by having the daughter of the Grand Vizier look like a neighbor's daughter and by having her take the initiative in the love affair. He woke up convinced of his love for Estherel and, only then, only after having solved the love problems through the assertive behavior of the

heroine, did a literary solution, a solution for the fairy tale within "Growing Up," present itself to him: "it occurred to me to name the girl in my book Estherel and that I could become Ben Zion, who saved her from the cannibal and married her" (Stories 230).

The solution to the story was also an approach to the sibling rivalry. The decision to become Ben Zion is a great improvement over his original split hero, in that it allows for resolution of the story. It also foreshadows Singer's development as a writer through introjection of and identification with his brother rather than through open competition.²² In the story, instead of making Haiml older to compete with Ben Zion on an equal basis, he blends with his competitor. It is precisely because he finds competition with the brother more difficult than introjection that he does not complete his fairy tale. Instead, he draws plans for when he grows up: "I decided that when I grew up I would write not just a story book but a whole novel about Estherel and myself" (Stories 230). Isaac compromised by attaining his goals in the imaginary realm of future plans, fantasies, and dreams.

²²I have found only one written expression of Isaac's hostility toward Joshua. In Remembrances of a Rabbi's Son, Translated by Rena Borow with a lithograph by Chaim Gross (New York: The UJA Federation Campaign, Inc. 1984) p. 22, Isaac fantasizes: "What if my brother Joshua were suddenly to turn into a chimney sweep with a rope, a broom and an iron ball, and the children were to stand below and chant to him on the roof: 'Meat cleaver, kugel-eater,/ Hop, hop,/ Fall off!/'."

In his fantasies and dreams, Isaac may compete with his father and become a more powerful rabbi than him, but there is evidence of his being a great deal more sympathetic to his father's views than Joshua was. Joshua detected very early that, though their parents had the same ostensible wishes for their children--that they be rabbis and pious Jewish matrons--they were not, at a deep level, really operating together because the two had conflicting and irreconcilable stances toward the world. The father was, in beliefs and temperament, a fundamentalist, rather superstitious Jew while the mother was a rationalist. The mother was a subversive sub-text in this pious home. In his own struggle for differentiation, Joshua rejected the father's ways and favored the mother's, and he thought that his parents "would have been a well-mated couple if she had been the husband and he the wife" (Quoted by Kresh, p.35). Joshua became very rationalistic and disparaged his father's beliefs in miracles, demons, and other supernatural manifestations.

Isaac's different feelings in this regard can be surmised from his reactions and behavior in "Why the Geese Shrieked." After his mother removed the windpipes from two dead geese, whose shrieking was interpreted by her husband as incontrovertible proof of the existence of the creator, Isaac found himself praying "inwardly that the geese would shriek, shriek so loud that people in the street would hear and come running" (Father's Court 20). When the geese remained silent,

Isaac had tears in his eyes. He cried in intuitive understanding of what the mother has destroyed with her simple adherence to the logic of material things. He mourned the loss of the father's magical world of self-fulfilling fantasy. The mother's act was casting them out of the realm in which words (and desire) were one with the world and God could manifest Himself through the shrieks of dead geese to satisfy the wishes of a man piously devoted to the imaginary, to the search for serenity in one object, to the belief in one meaning which lent significance to all else. Much of Singer's fiction attempts to recreate this "powerfully desired world." This makes his writing "quick with the verve, wit, precision and crispness possible only to passion."²³

Additional evidence of the brothers' different reaction to their home situation is the view of their parents that they disclose in their autobiographical works. Isaac's father, who is the central figure of In My Father's Court, is a saintly rabbi who attracts people with his benevolence and naivete and impresses with his religious erudition. In this memoir, Isaac's mother, Bathsheba, makes delicious food, and Isaac continually praises her even though he somewhat dreads her rationalism and skepticism. And the general tone of In My Father's Court is one of homage to the past and of recognition of the parents.

²³Edward Alexander, Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Study of the Short Fiction (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) p. 119.

In Of A World that Is No More Joshua treats both parents unapologetically. Joshua, who confesses that he acquired early a passion for realism (Of a World 13) depicts his father as a distracted creature who was terrified of life, never managed to become an official rabbi due to his failure to pass the required language exams, and "hated responsibilities of any kind" (p. 17). Pinchos Mendele was not only unable to earn enough for the family's basic needs but also contrived to lose whatever money they happened to chance upon. Against Bathsheba's advice, he invested money inherited from his family, and originally destined for Hinde Esther's dowry, in a venture in which he was swindled by his partner. When Bathsheba then gave him the last of her jewelry to pawn, he succeeded in losing the money on the way back home (pp.243-456). Bathsheba, who was the main victim of her husband's ineptness, struggled valiantly to keep things afloat. She assured the children a certain respite from poverty by taking them for interludes of several months' duration at her father's more prosperous home. But although Joshua sympathized with her, he showed her flaws and particularly excoriated her poor cooking.

The most distinctive feature of Joshua's book, however, is the tone of direct complaint and indictment. He referred to his father's "obstinately [refusing] to learn the Russian and the grammar" (p.16) he needed to become an official rabbi, declared that their home was gloomy because of the "Torah,

which filled every cranny of our house and weighed heavily on the spirits of those living there" (p.29), and stated plainly that, at heder, he had only "formed a strong dislike for the Torah" (p.25). He described heder as a place where little children were confined and mistreated by totalitarian teachers, and seems to have intuited early that more flexible and democratic means would have been more effective in the struggle against evil than the tyrannical ways of the heder and of most Jewish religious training.

Isaac could never be as overtly critical as Joshua about his parents' shortcomings and about their religion. Instead, he "remained silent, with opinions of [his] own" (Father's Court 199), and he "practiced [his] theory that one could not proceed in a straight, direct fashion through the world but had to constantly smuggle [oneself] through, or muddle through" (Love and 150). Finding openness impossible, Isaac adopted surreptitiousness in the pursuit of his developmental needs. Instead of standing up to his parents to decry openly, as Joshua did, the rigidity and backwardness of Hasidism, and to demand more flexibility and enlightenment, Isaac roamed the streets of Warsaw without permission, listened behind closed doors, and secretly read secular literature. He told a little lie here and there,²⁴ overflowed with expansive fantasies and

²⁴Singer's childhood lying is in perfect keeping with Piaget's assertion that the tendency to tell lies is a very natural one, "so spontaneous and universal that we can take it as an essential part of the child's egocentric thought." Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgment of the Child (Chicago: The Free

dreams, and played at preserving his imagination in writing. He learned early to use his stories for the pursuit of personal goals. Deprived of a legitimate way to develop his potential openly, Singer did so surreptitiously and imaginatively. Long before his writing of fiction became his profession and his livelihood, it was his life; it was both his way of unfolding the self that refused to be silenced and stifled and his way of hiding from a world that opposed such an unfolding. His writing of fiction was simultaneously a means of expression and growth and an act of stealth.

But surreptitious means "clandestine" and "unauthorized," and Singer was never able to forget that. He never lost the sense of being a full-time transgressor. And there is a way in which he never ceased to associate human development with sin. His literary work, which was his growth and salvation, was also the most unpardonable infraction against everything his parents lived and died for. Singer was trespassing (just as he trespasses the boundaries of genre) into territory forbidden by his father, an act analogous to gaining access to the equally forbidden mother. This trespass is also a penetration of the walls dividing Jewish and gentile society. It is a bursting out of Hasidic space to penetrate a proscribed realm. Burdened with such great transgressions, Singer struggled to conceal himself behind his own act of assertion and expression (or within it, as he later confined his

protagonists in cells, lofts, religious ritual, slavery, and prison), but the hiding was done so seductively and insistently that it became its own (no doubt much desired) unveiling and he got caught by fame and notoriety. Writing as expression and assertion blew the cover of writing as stealth, and he found himself the winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize in literature, "denounced" to the entire world as the triumphant author of fiction in which "the devil has the last word" (Sontag, 62). After this, he became vociferous in his denunciations of assimilation and strident in his praise of Orthodox Judaism. As if to atone for the injury to his parents and for his life as a religious outlaw, Singer used some of his children's stories to promote religious beliefs. In addition, in his last books like The Penitent and Scum,²⁵ he experimented with self-disgust and punishment, in an apparent desire to undo, or/and be penalized for, the fictional and real outrages of his youth.

Fortunately, much to the delight of readers worldwide, most of Singer's work was done by the "transgressor." And most of his children stories are not didactic but are instead charming narratives which can help illuminate the struggles Singer had to wage in order to attain some of his developmental goals.

²⁵Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Penitent (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983); Scum (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991).

Life Is a Fairy Tale: "The Milk of a Lioness."

In accordance with Bruno Bettelheim's definition of fairy tales as "stories [that] are unreal, [but] are not untrue,"²⁶ "Mazel and Shlimazel: or The Milk of a Lioness" (Stories 22-40) mixes the realistic and the fabulous with felicitous results to show how growing people, besieged as the young always are by a multiplicity of dangers, manage to carve out precarious but ultimately safe paths for their development. But in addition to charting the growth of the protagonists, "The Milk of the Lioness" also hints that Singer perceived the struggle for growth to be very fierce, that he accurately assessed the nurturing frailties and inadequacies of most male and female adults, and that he greatly valued the help of a compatible, strong female peer in his strivings.

The first revealing thing about the "The Milk of a Lioness" is that it is a rags-to-riches story in which, contrary to the tradition as established in stories like Cinderella (though in accordance with less well-known folk tales), the protagonist is a boy rather than a girl. Tam is not only the poorest person in his village, sorely in need of a princess to grant him the life he properly deserves, but he is also completely alone and devoid of any energy or motivation. He lives in a boarded-up hut which perfectly signifies his state of isolation. He is separated not only

²⁶Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) p.73.

from the other villagers but also from the world of nature, from the beautiful, sunny day outside his boarded-up windows. He sits on a cot, which is as broken down as his spirit, and he is barefoot and half naked, unequipped for the outside world. Such is his despair as he describes his condition that one can read his physical poverty as equivalent to his psychological inadequacy. This is how he sounds:

I once had parents, but they were unlucky. My father died of consumption. My mother went to the forest to gather mushrooms and was bitten by a poisonous snake. The small piece of land they left me is so full of rocks that I can hardly farm it. (Stories 25)

Such a record of bad fortune made any action on his part completely useless, and thoroughly justified a state of dormancy which, as in Sleeping Beauty, is normally a characteristic of maidens rather than of young men. The influx of energy needed to shake him out of his lethargic condition is supplied by his fairy godfather Mazel.

Mazel, the fairy godfather, is the spirit of good luck, as his name indicates, and possesses only positive physical and psychological traits. He is young, well shaped, handsome, fit of limb and mind, and overflowing with good intention. His only weakness is that he cannot resist the temptation to compete with Shlimazel, who, of course, is his complete opposite. Shlimazel is older, has a crooked nose, a contorted body and a twisted mind. He limps with the help of a knotty-wood cane, and his long black coat and peaked hat contrast

significantly with Mazel's green jacket, red riding breeches, feathered hat, and silver spurred boots. The two spirits' interest in Tam comes as a result of a wager they make to test their power against each other. Shlimazel threatens to undo in one second whatever Mazel has accomplished in an entire year. In keeping with the fairy-tale's traditional splitting of the parent, they represent the good and bad aspects of a father--with the interesting twist that even the good parent sees nothing wrong with his involvement in this power game--and they take opposite positions in Tam's acquiring yet one more father figure, the wealthy father-in-law.

Once he is out of his hut, Tam has to rapidly learn to negotiate his way through a veritable forest of father figures. In addition to Mazel and Shlimazel, there is the king, who Mazel transports to Tam's very door, and who brings him to the castle and serves as a substitute father for a while. After Tam expands the king's powers by obtaining new territories and subjects, the Prime Minister Kamstan becomes the young man's enemy and turns the King against Tam by alerting the king to the fact that Tam is becoming a formidable suitor to whom it will be difficult to deny Princess Nesika's hand.

Until this moment, the king has been kind to Tam, but he does not wish to marry his only daughter to a peasant. To aggravate the situation, Nesika occupies the position of a suspiciously absent wife-mother. "From the King's point of

view, Tam's triumph would entail giving up his daughter, and, to the extent that he has been without a wife, the relationship between the king and Nesika has the veiled quality of a marital relationship" (Wolf 152). Consequently, although after he becomes ill the King is compelled to enlist Tam's services in the search for the cure, and to promise Tam Nesika's hand in exchange, he does all this out of necessity and never ceases to be Tam's adversary.

As for the two spirits, they are clear personifications of aspects of Tam's. Mazel embodies activity and overflows with zest while Shlimazel limps his way through life with the help of a cane, and engages in activity only to be able to win from Mazel the wine of forgetfulness. Shlimazel's actions have one aim: to make it possible for him to drink himself to oblivion. He seems to be seeking the type of lethargic state in which we initially find Tam in his boarded-up hut. Or, as H. R. Wolf has pointed out, these two spirits could be thought of as Eros and Thanatos struggling for prevalence within the young man (pp.155-56). While Mazel/Eros prevails Tam moves easily from one achievement to another in an atmosphere suffused by the love of the princess and the flattering attraction of other ladies in the court, and his growth occurs in an ambiance charged with love and eroticism.

It is through love and eroticism that the story unfolds, for although adult males are predominant in "The Milk of a Lioness" (as they are in "Growing Up"), in Singer's work males

are rarely the means to resolution. On the contrary, as Leslie Fielder has observed in "The American-ness of the American Jewish Writer," "the emphasis in Singer's work seems to be in "a desperate metaphysical joining of male and female flesh" (p.128). Dinah Pladott notes that Singer's heroes discover facets of their character through their relationship with the many women in their lives.²⁷ Any reader of Singer's fiction for adults can ascertain very quickly that his writings are frenetic voyages of self-discovery through heterosexual love and sex. Singer has confessed that he has only two idols, "the idol of literature and the idol of love" (Love and 169), and we have seen how literature became instrumental in his personal development very early in life. In "The Milk of a Lioness," the two protagonists use their love to help each other move from one stage of growth to another.

The motif of growth is intertwined with the motif of swift movement in this story. Thus when the king's carriage is immobilized in front of Tam's hut, Tam fixes the wheel and gets it rolling again. Later, Tam goes on to work in the royal smithy, where he puts in motion vehicles that were believed to be stopped forever. In addition, any horse he rides becomes the fleetest in the land. This dexterity at getting vehicles and animals moving is only a manifestation of the drive toward development which Mazel has awakened. Princess Nesika detects

²⁷Dinah Pladott, "Casanova or Schlemiel? The Don Juan Archetype in I. B. Singer's Fiction," Yiddish 6. 2-3, (Summer and Fall 1985): 59.

this immediately--right after he fixes the carriage's wheel--and she pronounces Tam handsome and feels sure that "many a prince could learn from him" (Stories 29). Nesika has just rejected her seventh suitor of royal blood, because his shoes were foolish, but she is instantly attracted to the half-naked, barefoot Tam.

In the Uses of Enchantment Bruno Bettelheim discusses at length the motif of shoes in which the feet can fit perfectly, and the connection of this motif to the search for the right bride, from an Egyptian tale over two thousand years old to Cinderella. In "The Milk of a Lioness," the search is not for the right bride but for the right groom, and the shoes in question are Prince Typpish's boots. Nesika argues that she has rejected Typpish (whose name means fool) because if the boots are foolish the feet are also foolish, and if the feet are foolish, so is the head. The prince seems to have been lacking in seriousness and in substance. He is a fully developed male--as indicated by the full boots--who does not fit her in more ways than one. Tam, on the other hand, is barefoot. His feet, not yet encased in anything, are visible. What they reveal about his head--his mind--is obviously positive since the princess takes an immediate liking to him. One may surmise that Tam's lack of shoes places him in an earlier stage of development than that of the prince; he is closer in age to the seventeen-year-old Nesika than is Typpish. He is a young man whose ideas are still in formation,

and he shows the promise of being flexible because his mind is still open, unenclosed, like his feet. The princess seemed to have been looking for this type of husband, one who is not yet set in incompatible ways.

A couple who do not share flexibility and mental compatibility cannot grow. Nesika was unconsciously groping for ways to move forward in her development. From Typpish's ornate boots she might have gathered that this was a man with whom she was fated to stagnate not only mentally but also physically. Tam may be barefoot, but perhaps his feet look strong enough for a walk, no matter how arduous.

Furthermore, after he fixes the wheel of the carriage, it becomes obvious that, young and unexperienced as he is, "many a prince could learn from him" (Stories 29). Finally, Tam's ability to facilitate quick physical motion also promises a more dynamic sexual life. Tam seems to offer Nesika both mental and sexual growth; one of these things cannot be fully attained without the others.

When the two young protagonists find themselves confronted with the four male figures, only one of whom supports them totally (and that only to win a bet), they intuitively respond by engaging in concerted action; paralleling the two spirits, they take turns at activity and passivity. Continuing with the reversal of the fairy tale tradition, Nesika is the first one to feel love and to talk about it. But after this initial assertiveness, she recedes

into the background and we hear only that her love for Tam, which she tried to keep secret, is obvious to everyone, including the king. During this time, Tam is in the world of action and of males, proving that he is worthy of the princess, while Nesika watches lovingly from afar. This orchestration of the protagonists' growth as they proceed toward adulthood is a crucial determinant of their eventual success. For at the end, when Tam momentarily loses speech and action, Nesika takes the steps necessary to gain a happy outcome.

What occurs is that, after obtaining the milk of the lioness to restore the king's health, Tam is overcome with enormous anxiety (Mazel's time is up and Shlimazel is in control) and he tells the king that he has brought the milk of a dog (Stories 33). This slip of the tongue may be attributed to a number of psychological causes. The most obvious is the son's normal fear of destruction by the father (castration anxiety). But a father is not the only person who can destroy a young man, and castration anxiety may be elicited by other people who may or may not represent the father. As noted above, women are conspicuously absent in this tale, except for Nesika, who probably served as a substitute wife to the king. The only mother in the story is the lioness. Thus the female figure is split into a loving bride, Nesika, and a fierce mother, the lioness.

To represent motherhood in the figure of the most aggressive and carnivorous of animals is a provocative act. Isaac Bashevis Singer has always acknowledged the autobiographical nature of much of his work. Isaac's mother, Bathsheba, was red-headed and strong, a woman with a skeptical turn of mind. She was a fierce intellectual contender and a determined rationalist married to an aspiring saint, and she continually defeated her husband's wishful-thinking interpretations of reality. The firmness and ferocity with which she adhered to her rationalism awed and depressed Pinchos and Isaac. But Bathsheba was capable of even more formidable behavior. As mentioned, she rejected her first-born child Hinde Esther because it was not a son, and placed her with a wet nurse for three years (Kresh 129). The Singer children, including Isaac, who knew this family history, may have internalized a model of the mother as an awesome being who is capable of exercising her powers of life and death over her helpless dependents. Or, to put it another way, Singer may have gained a keener awareness of this component of motherhood than most of us do. In the story "Strangers," Bathsheba tells Isaac that she resembles her own father, and says, "my father was a lion."²⁸

The wild mother of Singer's experience has to be tamed into feeding the needy infant and, in Bathsheba's case, the

²⁸Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Strangers" in The Image and Other Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) p. 254.

taming seems to have been effected through the magic of maleness, as indicated by the fact that Bathsheba's two other daughters did not survive childhood while her three sons--Joshua, Isaac, and Moishe--grew to adulthood. Both girls died of scarlet fever, but of the first of these two daughters Joshua said: "mother was too dry to nurse the infant and it cried often." Of the second he remarked: "Years later, when mother gave birth to yet another redhaired girl, she again sent me to Reb Itche to have him remove the evil eye from the baby who couldn't stop crying, apparently for the same reason as her sister" (Of a World 142, 148). The milk of fierce Bathsheba was as scarce as it was powerful.

Consequently, when the king is seriously ill in "The Milk of a Lioness," it follows that the medicine should be milk, that this milk be obtainable only from a powerful and dangerous mother, a lioness, and that the feat can only be accomplished by a male. This is precisely what Tam does, but as soon as he realizes the magnitude of his achievement, he falls prey to profound anxiety.

There are many possible reasons for this anxiety. Tam exceeds the king's power by obtaining milk from the queen of beasts, a symbol of the king's wife. To do this, he narrowly escapes destruction by the lioness. As though this were not enough, Tam's perilous action is to be rewarded with marriage to the assertive Nesika, the future queen. Tam's temporary taming of the queen of the beasts is to result in permanent

union to the lioness of the kingdom. It is no wonder, then, that he claims to have brought the milk of a dog, a tame domestic animal and not the king of the beasts. Up until this moment, Tam himself had been as loyal and serviceable as a dog. But after performing the kingly deed of taming a lioness, thus becoming entitled to Nesika's hand, Tam is overcome by fear of retribution or destruction (castration anxiety). The fact that this destruction could come from either King or bride makes the situation more menacing than the normal father and son struggle. By comparison, Tam's previous position as faithful, undemanding, loyal servant to the king seems infinitely preferable. Better to be safe as a faithful, royal dog than to incur the dangers of life among the lions.

Immediately after his slip of the tongue, language deserts Tam; he loses speech and is unable to defend himself. He is thrown into a dungeon to await death, and Nesika is not allowed to intercede in his favor; she is not allowed to speak for him. All language is now in the possession of Mazel and Shlimazel who, appropriately, wage their last verbal battle for Tam "in the deepest cellar of the palace" (Stories 34).

In a scene which is obviously intended to represent Tam's own internal struggle, Mazel and Shlimazel enact the eternal war between the urge for passivity and/or oblivion and the dictates of reason and reality. Shlimazel shows himself the victim of poverty--his father had been only a water carrier in Paradise, and his mother the servant of a saint (p.36)--and

stupidity by his inability to see that the destruction of the world (which he advocates), would also mean the disappearance of his beloved wine of forgetfulness. Mazel has no difficulty defeating him by feeding him the wine he so badly wants. After Shlimazel falls into a drunken stupor, Mazel is back in control.

Tam's plunge into the depths of the dungeon, and of his mind, brings his voice back. The encounter between the Mazel and Shlimazel within him dramatizes the dangers of attempting to elude reality and resist normal growth. Tam acknowledges this by taking the unavoidable step of confronting the king. He appeases the monarch with a factual lie which is a psychological truth. He claims he called the lioness a dog because that is all a lioness is when compared with the king. The claim of conscious intentionality is a lie, but Tam did perceive the king as threatening and lion-like, someone who could easily destroy him, particularly when Tam was adopting the position of a rival both in his love for Nesika and in taming the queen-like lioness. Transforming the lioness into a dog, by feat of language, removed all heroism from Tam's action, thus directly signifying Tam's obeisance to the superior authority and power of the king and, most importantly, reduced the oedipal weight of the situation through the oblique renunciation of all claims to the mother. This lessening of the oedipal dangers is part and parcel of Tam's sense of the inevitability of growth (the defeat of the

oblivion-seeking Shlimazel in him) and causes the young man to regain his courage and to claim lionship for himself by expressing, for the first time in the story, his love for Nesika. He confronts the father and king without fear and openly acknowledges his love for the princess, thereby proving that he was capable of rising to the challenges of life as an adult.

The moment Tam asserts himself to protect his life and to pursue the princess's hand, Nesika emerges in a nurturing role. "She herself ran to bring the milk to her father" (Stories 38), which she had taken care to save because she never lost faith in Tam. This gesture shows her to be a loyal daughter, supportive wife, and potentially nurturing mother.

However, as the imagery of the wedding indicates, her being trustworthy does not make Nesika less lion-like. On her wedding day, she wears a coronet set with the diamond figure of a lioness. She continues to be the same assertive creature who, in a reversal of roles, had taken the initiative in her love affair with Tam. She is the same fierce person who had stood up to her father and had rejected seven princes to marry the man of her choice. Like Bathsheba, Isaac's mother, Nesika rejected wealthier suitors to marry a poor man. Nesika's chosen groom also reveals himself through his wedding apparel, wearing the Order of Selfless Devotion. He is less a lion than a devoted servant, much like Pinchos, Isaac's father, who led a life of service to his religion and his community. But also,

like Isaac in the memoirs, he shows devotion to his parents' memory.

As is the case in fairy tales, "The Milk of the Lioness" presents the truth without disguises. It is a treacherous world that the protagonists have to contend with, a world of powerful adult males and females. The powerless young must seduce the majestic adult female into nurturing and loving them. They must love and confront the father in all of his impersonations, and they must carefully, almost stealthily, find a safe way from one stage of growth to another. It is a world that corresponds very closely to the experience of childhood and youth as seen by Karen Horney and by Alice Miller. The adult world, even at its best, is more interested in control and power than in the well-being of their young. In this story, even the fairy godfather is involved in a power game.

Fortunately, in keeping with the fairy tale tradition and with third-force psychology ideas regarding the resilience and strong developmental drives of human beings, the protagonists find the means to succeed without compromising their basic characters. Tam and Nesika triumph through love, concerted action, and assertiveness. This fairy tale completely lives up to the genre, for "without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails [it] offer[s] examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties" (Bettelheim 6).

However, "The Milk of a Lioness" is not a fairy tale in one respect; it is not "the result of common conscious and unconscious content having been shaped by . . . the consensus of many in regard to what they accept as desirable solutions" (Bettelheim p.36). This tale is written by an individual rather than by many throughout time, and it bears his identifying marks. The story contains interesting implications regarding Isaac Bashevis Singer's views of, and relationships with, his father and mother. As fierce as the lioness is, she still provides (at least for males) the fluids of life. Her double, the beautiful and assertive Nesika, is both a comrade in growth and a fierce defender of their interests. The two of them guarantee an exciting--bordering on dangerous--existence. This is not exactly the case with the four other males in the story, for whom Tam was more a pawn in a power struggle than a human being. Edwin Gittleman argues that the creative writer in Isaac was "almost sacrificed" (like his biblical namesake) on the altar of Pinchos Mendele's traditional beliefs and was saved from extinction by his willingness to participate in the guilt of his rationalistic and fierce mother. Isaac was saved by choosing to dwell in "the balcony [which] is the perilous resort of the biblical Bathsheba . . . a state of mind where the imagination can range beyond the limits of paternal control, and where one's traditions can be created and then

examined."²⁹ Something similar occurs in "The Milk of a Lioness." Tam narrowly escapes destruction in the male realm of conquest and courage and only finds safety, fulfillment, and happiness in the admittedly threatening but also supportive and potentially liberating realm of female voraciousness and love. This is at the core of the behavior of most of Singer's heroes.

²⁹Edwin Gittleman, "Isaac's Nominal Case: In My Father's Court," Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Edwin Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.202.

CHAPTER IV
SINGER'S HEROES AND THEIR SEARCH

Singer's fictional heroes are variations on a theme. As we shall see by using as examples "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw," The Slave, and The Family Moskat, they are alternate versions of Singer's own self, different impersonations of the author who are devoted to an idealistic search for God and love. They are, in general, young men of pious background who find themselves plagued by an interest in their surroundings which inevitably leads them into the study of secular subjects and away from the Orthodox Judaism of their childhood. Unable to resist their appetite for life and for the world, they shed the outward signs of their past--their beards, earlocks, and Hasidic costume--and plunge into a generally undisciplined and unsystematic pursuit of intellectual development and sensuous pleasures. They read omnivorously and accept their propensity for doubt as the main attribute of their being human. Convinced of their own goodness and benevolence, they develop adversarial relationships with the God whose cruelty they vehemently decry and seek to replace God with literature and with erotic love, generally heterosexual love. But they are not thoroughly convinced, they vacillate and they often react

to their own rebellion with guilty penitence and self-flagellation.

As a consequence of their deification of love, Singer's protagonists exhibit a stance toward women which is so complex that Singer has been accused of detesting the opposite sex and of seeing women as "creation's most savory form of pork."¹ This claim of misogyny oversimplifies his position but could be documented with incidents of hostility and distaste toward women present in Singer's work. It is undeniable, as Evelyn Torton Beck has shown, that through a number of his characters, Singer "betrays a deep mistrust, revulsion and hostility toward women, especially those who in any way stray from their prescribed roles or cease to organize their lives around men."² Both Singer and his characters are, after all, the products of Judaism, which is, in turn, the origin and paradigm of patriarchal society. Nevertheless, as unsuccessful as Singer's protagonists are in eluding completely their legacy of well-established male-oriented ideas and practices, they still resemble the little boy of "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw" who shows the opposite of misogyny by choosing--as opposed to merely accepting as Tam does--female company and complicity to attain his most cherished dreams and objectives.

¹Leon Wielseltier, "The Revenge of Isaac Bashevis Singer" New York Review of Books, Dec. 7, 1978, p. 7.

²Evelyn Torton Beck, "The Many Faces of Eve: Women, Yiddish, and Isaac Bashevis Singer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1, (1981): 115.

"A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw" and Singer's Search for Ideal Love.

The Isaac of "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw"³ (a memoir, published as a children's story, in which all members of the Singer family are named) is only six and sits in cheder thinking about "Shosha with whom [he] carried on an unspoken love affair" and whose "childish words . . . held a thousand delights for [him]" (Stories, 57). He wishes he had a million rubles to buy chocolate, halvah and tangerines for her and to treat her to a sleigh ride. Later, Isaac is afraid to go home because he is steeped in the sins of eluding adult supervision and of indulging in his favorite lie about being an orphan (Singer is unself-conscious in portraying these repeated family-romance fantasies), and he remembers a story Joshua had told him about a boy who had run away from home and had come back a grown man and a professor. Fantasizing with delight about the secular education he could obtain away from home, Isaac decides to imitate the fictional character of his brother's story. He dreams of "books about the sun, the moon, the stars" and about the "telescope through which you could see the mountains and craters of the moon" (p.63), as he mentally prepares for his departure. Realizing that he will miss Shosha, he decides to take her along so that they could "study together in Berlin" (p.64). This desire for a woman who is an accomplice in escape and adventure and a person with

³Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw," Stories for Children (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984) pp.53-70.

whom it is possible to conduct a life of study is a recurrent one in Singer's fiction.

But though Singer as grown narrator perseveres almost obstinately in his aspirations, he is also very clear-sighted and does not fail to perceive the difficulties inherent in his schemes. In the story, he is forced to make a rough re-entry into the quotidian when Shosha responds to his summons to a life of love, adventure, and learning by worrying about food and shelter. He is astounded and deflated, and Isaac's mother and sister compound the debacle by dragging him back home in sorry defeat.

Infinitely desirable as they are and indispensable for the attainment of his particular dreams, women are also his greatest impediment. From the evidence of his work, however, Singer rises above the facile expedient of blaming women for their attention to practical necessities. Instead, he creates fictional characters who recognize that society polarizes the roles of males and females and severely hinders the type of relationship the little boy in "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw" longed for.

Singer's characters object to the strictures of society. They find it impossible to give up women but are extremely reluctant to make long-term commitments and strenuously try to avoid (or escape from) marriage and family responsibility. They engage in multiple affairs in an apparent effort to find the type of comrade Shosha could not become--a lover, fellow

adventurer and student mate--and they use language and the discussion of ideas and beliefs as means of seduction and foreplay. Pinchos Mendel (the author's father) sought union with God. Singer's heroes also want union, but not with God. Instead, they aspire to transcendence through fusion with another human being. They generally fail because their women do not view love as the means to move into an idealistic realm but rather as their way of inserting themselves more firmly into the fabric of society through marriage and reproduction, the two things Singer's heroes are determined to evade. Singer's protagonists appear to hold in common the intuition that, just as it proves so difficult to achieve differentiation within the boundaries of the family, it is equally difficult to attain an ideal relationship between man and women within the traditional confines of a marriage; true union cannot be attained without circumventing society.

All the characteristics of Singer's male protagonists come directly from the author as presented in his autobiographical volumes. A Young Man in Search of Love, and Lost in America⁴ read like dress rehearsals for the romantic and sexual-philosophical entanglements that characterize Singer's work for adults. In these memoirs, the frenzied boy of "Growing Up" becomes a youth who searches for God with

⁴Isaac Bashevis Singer, A Young Man in Search of Love. Illustrated by Raphael Soyer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972); Singer, Lost in America. Illustrated by Raphael Soyer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday 1979).

furious aggression and wages war with the creator while experimenting with love and sex. The memoirs follow Singer's swerve from piety to worldliness. Isaac betrays the hopes of his pious father, Rabbi Pinchos Mendel, and slowly emerges as the unique, independent person whose outline is already clear in "Growing Up" and "A Day of Pleasures." He discards his beard, earlocks and long gabardine, becomes steeped in worldly reading, with a predilection for Spinoza, and goes to work in Warsaw, where he begins his career as writer and as lover. His women include Gina, his landlady, who wants to have a child with him but is past her reproductive years; Marila, the maid at his second boarding house (multiple boarding houses, which Singer habitually had because he hated to disappoint his landladies and landlords, were to become the much analyzed several homes of some of the novels); Stefa, a married woman; Sabina, a leftist; Singer's cousin Esther, who moves into modernity by having Isaac initiate her sexually; and Lena, a Communist who becomes the mother of his only child, a son he never wanted to have.

Singer never wished to be a father. He wanted women as accomplices in the search for pleasure, mental development and unity, but tried to deny them their desires for marriage and children. In this he was extremely egotistical and perhaps even anti-feminist. Like many artists, he was ruthless and self-absorbed. He was primarily interested in what he could get out of a relationship, and his longing for a compatible

female was very tied to his own wish to excel as a writer. Unresolved oedipal feelings may also have contributed to his reluctance to become a father. His own father failed to live up to his responsibilities as a provider and was dominated by his strong wife. Perhaps he feared the same fate for himself.

However, Singer was also an idealist who sought to obtain freedom, self-realization, and elevation into a higher realm through sexual communion with a perfect female. What Pinchos wished to do through religious belief and observance, Isaac tried to do through sexual love. He wanted complicity with a woman in his perhaps defensive efforts to vanquish the chaotic ways of nature. His aim was for the couple to rise together into the delusional but useful certitude of mastering nature (the cycle of life and death to which the imagination is hostage) through language, love, and learning. Like all idealists, Singer was frequently afflicted by what Simone de Beauvoir has called "revolt against his carnal state," by bitterness about having "fallen from a bright and ordered heaven into the chaotic shadows of his mother's womb," when he would have preferred to "be inevitable, like a pure Idea, like the One, the All, the absolute Spirit."⁵

Singer strove to overcome the flesh by indulging in it for pleasure only, not for reproduction. I believe that for him paternity was too great an acknowledgement and affirmation

⁵Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) p.146.

of limitation and mortality. It opened up the troublesome issue of man's inferiority to God. God created the entire universe completely alone but man needs woman merely to believe that he is assuring his own continuation, when by reproducing he is, in fact, accepting his mortality. To aggravate the situation even further, man is never sure of being a creator of other human beings, never completely certain of his own individual role in procreation as woman is. And as if this were not enough, with procreation, the desired fusion with women is made even more utopian, and man and woman are forced to curtail, or even to abandon, the activities designed to attain the unfolding of their two selves' complete potential. A third self demands the attention of the couple and the labor now is, necessarily, that of replication of their own insufficiently developed selves. It is a biological and social cycle all idealists must find irksome.

In his personal life, Singer was not successful in attaining his idealistic objectives and was compelled (one has to presume that he could not help it) to behave rather heartlessly. He circumvented the reproductive cycle by irresponsibly allowing his mistress Runya to bring up their child all by herself--he rejected the baby even more thoroughly than Bathsheba did Hinde Esther--and by later marrying a woman who was willing to leave her own two children behind (thus partaking of his cruelty and guilt) in order to dedicate her life to him. This, and also evidence from some of

the novels, forces one to conclude that Singer desired complete devotion from a woman and saw children as rivals because they would take from him some of the mothering he still needed and wanted. But Singer's extreme actions seem born of desperation and confirm rather than negate his emotional attachment to idealistic notions and aspirations. Characteristically, instead of worrying about his son's life without a father, he felt sorrow because the child would be "weighed down with a heritage (familiar, cultural, but above all human, I insist in surmising) from which it could never be free."⁶

His own inherited burden, Singer was very determined to lighten. From the intensity with which he pursued sex arises the suspicion that he saw lust as his way of asserting volition; "I like it" was his preferred way of seizing the present and of evading the Hasidic call to live in the past in preparation for "the world to come." He combined love with learning and pursued them both with a voraciousness of nearly cosmic proportions, foreshadowing his fictional heroes who explicitly associate love, knowledge, and the cosmic, and who use love as their main way to propel themselves out of the confines of their original group.

In The Family Moskat, the Bialodrevna rabbi says in reference to Hadassah, "Maybe she's fallen in love--God

⁶Isaac Bashevis Singer, Love and Exile (Garden City, New York: 1984) p.289

forbid."⁷ summarizing very forcefully the Hasidic response to this human emotion. This negative attitude toward love was one of the things Singer rebelled openly against, going as far as to use sexual love as the most effective way to push against Hasidic limitations and to enlarge the restricted options for individual differentiation and self-definition his background offered. As Dinah Pladott mentions, Singer's heroes "are basically inquirers, searching for personal answers," and who "in seeking to establish [their] role and [their] ties to each of [their] women, exhibit, and discover, different facets of [their] character and self[ves]."⁸

However, some of Singer's protagonists go beyond this scandalous, but still socially tolerated, modality of multiple heterosexual affairs. Such was the strength of the author's hopes regarding love, that he could not be in the least decorous in carrying out his rebellion, and in his fiction resorted to devices he himself might not have approved of completely. Irving H. Buchen has asserted, for example, that "to Singer, the most serious betrayal of all . . . is the blurring of masculine and feminine clarity." Nevertheless, Singer could not refrain from this "betrayal."⁹ In "Yentl the

⁷Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Family Moskat (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1950) p. 87.

⁸Dinah Pladott, "Casanova or Schlemiel? The Don Juan Archetype in I. B. Singer's Fiction" Yiddish 6. 2-3, (Summer and Fall 1985): 59.

⁹Irving H. Buchen, Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p.121.

Yeshiva Boy,"¹⁰ the intense attraction between Avigdor and Anshel/Yentl and Avigdor's realization that it was the "unfeminine" traits that made him love Yentl, make it clear that, in his desire for a union of souls, Singer was willing to make sexual boundaries too indistinct and too permeable for conventional comfort. Critics who believe that Singer's search for love in his fiction was conducted exclusively through heterosexual relationships have ignored The King of the Fields. In this novel, Nosek, a sympathetic and wise Polish warrior, confesses that he does not like women because "it is hard to speak to them" and that he prefers to lie with other men because "when two men do this, they are friends, not enemies."¹¹ Evidently, Singer's interest in love was very encompassing, incorporating even homosexual love, and it transcended mere rebellion against religious and cultural prohibitions. Through love he sought to attain the well being and potential for growth inherent in intellectual camaraderie (studying together as Yentl and Avigdor do), conversation, and friendship.

¹⁰Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" in An Isaac Bashevis Singer Reader (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971)

¹¹Isaac Bashevis Singer, The King of the Fields (New York: Plume, 1988) p.73-74.

The Slave: The Freedom and Captivity of Defiant Attachment.

The Slave, is the novel which comes closest to articulating and attaining the type of love that Singer and his heroes so insistently pursued.¹² An indication of the unusual nature of this love is the fact that two critical responses to the novel have found it necessary to resort to rarely used terms and to define the relationship between Jacob and Wanda as an "alchemical marriage"¹³ and as a "hierogamy" or sacred marriage.¹⁴

Indeed, The Slave clamors for special treatment since it is Singer's most satisfying and most beautifully written long work. The novel's compelling quality and distinction are partially attributable to its having been translated by the poet Cecil Hemley. But also, this novel was written after The Magician of Lublin. The writing of The Magician of Lublin was act of exorcism which seems to have left Singer in an unusual state of mind. The Slave is the product of an extended moment of thoroughly achieved artistic consciousness and personal serenity. Here Singer's imagination ranges freely beyond the

¹²Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Slave, Translated by the author and Cecil Hemley (New York: Avon Books, 1962). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹³Ted Hughes, "The Genius of Isaac Bashevis Singer," New York Review of Books, April 22, 1965, p.10.

¹⁴Bonnie Lyons, "Sexual Love in I. B. Singer's Work," Studies in American Jewish Literature, Vol 1, 1981, p. 69.

boundaries of the internalized stringencies of his Hasidic past. Instead of the tormented uneasiness he evinces in other works, such as for example Satan in Goray, which treats also of 17th century Poland, there is calm assurance concerning what is really significant in life, and there is a sober and lyrical celebration of the beauty and happiness that it is still possible to seize in an imperfect world. Although this is a story of captivity, it is imaginatively written from the heights of Isaac's balcony over Krochmalna Street, and it is the artistic extension of the magic moment when a fluttering butterfly "was for [him] a greeting from the world of freedom."¹⁵ Susan Sontag responds to The Slave by flinging it as challenge to the "modern educated sensibility" to ascertain whether they still have "some appetite left for the climaxes of true love and noble death,"¹⁶ and she contrasts this novel with most of Singer's opus in which "the devil has the last word" (p.462). She comments that Singer is reported to have said that in The Slave, for a change, God had the last word. But, as Clive Sinclair has noted, Singer "cannot eradicate the self, even for the sake of Judaism,"¹⁷ and in

¹⁵Isaac Bashevis Singer, In My Father's Court (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1966) p.169.

¹⁶Susan Sontag, "Demons and Dreams," Partisan Review, Summer 1962, p.463.

¹⁷Clive Sinclair, The Brothers Singer (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1983) p.99. Hereafter cited as Sinclair.

this novel it is really human will and human love which reign supreme.

This is a story of perfect love between two distinctive and strong individuals who are physically, spiritually and intellectually compatible but who belong to two opposing religious and social groups. As they contrive to remain together against all odds, they discover the double sidedness of freedom and captivity and of isolation and incorporation into history and the life of the community. Irving Buchen believes that in this novel "Singer has stripped Jacob of all the complexities of society and history so that he may experience directly the divinity of original creation."¹⁸ But it is the divinity within their own persons that Singer wants Jacob and Wanda to delight in. Thus Singer endows his protagonists with the exemplary individuality, flexibility, and mental and emotional receptiveness which allow them to circumvent most of the pitfalls of society and history and to carry their love triumphantly to the end.

Singer's work abounds in fantasies and imagery of flight and heights, and there is a way in which his male protagonists are all Yasha Mazurs aiming to be perpetually and precariously aloft on a tightrope of their own devising, only to find themselves ultimately and irrevocably grounded. In this novel of captivity, which simultaneously questions and affirms

¹⁸Irving H. Buchen, Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past (New York: New York University Press, 1968) p.155.

individual choice, freedom is, as Frederick R. Karl has noted, "'freedom to' . . . the philosopher's cry--the phrase indicating what one can be, sui generis,"¹⁹ and we encounter two protagonists who succeed in their attempts by hovering above their circumstances. Both Jacob and Wanda are simply superior to the other members of their particular groups.

At first glance, the protagonists' superiority seems to be a matter of mere physical appearance.²⁰ Jacob is good looking, tall, and blond, very different from his fellow Jews, who tend to be shorter and dark haired. Wanda is beautiful, strong, clean, and unblemished, while her own peasant family and group are characterized by dirtiness and unwholesomeness. But it is soon evident that it is not a matter of just physical attributes, and that both protagonists maintain their physical and spiritual superiority by continuously exerting their will power.

¹⁹Frederick R. Karl, "Jacob Reborn, Zion Regained: I. B. Singer's The Slave," The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) p. 117.

²⁰Maximilian Novak, "Moral Grotesque and Decorative Grotesque in Singer's Fiction," The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969). Novak has pointed out the connection between physical appearance and spiritual and moral attributes in Singer's work and mentions the example of the village priest in The Slave as a case in which "Singer takes care of [the priest's] moral condition with a brief grotesque description" (p.58). Jacob's and Wanda's beauty are a reflection of their inner strength and goodness.

After fleeing into the mountains from the Chmielnicki massacre in seventeenth-century Poland, in which his wife and children and most of his village is wiped out, Jacob becomes the slave of Wanda's father, the peasant Jan Bzik. Jacob manages to hold on to his identity and sanity during more than four years of captivity by stubborn observance of religious practices, properly laced with episodes of "silently blam[ing] the creator for forcing one creature to annihilate another" (p.55). He sharpens his intelligence by composing rebuking addresses to the creator, preserves his Yiddish by talking to the cows, and maintains his equanimity by regarding nature with appreciation and respect. Though a scholar by training, he does his job well and learns to value his body and the labor it can perform. Wanda, already called by her community "The Lady," bears the hostility of her mother and siblings, and is forced to contrive means of deflecting her suitors, who include Stephan, the bailiff's son. She is a widow who never liked her brutish husband Stach, and she perseveres in her love for Jacob despite his initial rebuffs (he feels sex with her would be a sin against his religion) and the resulting laughter and mockery of other women in the community.

Jacob and Wanda share more in common with each other than with their original groups, and they are entirely unique in their willfulness, in their ability to respect their own perceptions of reality, and in their determination to live according to their own psychic and emotional needs. They

exemplify Singer's belief in the importance of not belittling the emotions and in the fact that "the desire of one human being for another is not only a desire of the body but also of the soul."²¹ Jacob and Wanda are also scandalously self-aware and self-oriented for their times. Surprisingly, despite their backgrounds, they believe in free choice. In spite of the fact that the union of gentile and Jew in their time and place is penalized with death, they persist in their love for each other.

The elevated and perilous nature of this love is beautifully dramatized in the consummation of the relationship. This occurs, appropriately enough for these protagonists, in the isolation and prominence of a mountain top. As Wanda is coming up the hill, she is followed very closely by an impending storm. Later, lightning illuminates the barn and "bathed her in such a heavenly glow that it seemed to [Jacob] the woman he had known before [his first wife] had only been a sign or a husk" (p.57). Prior to making love, concerned with ritual matters, Jacob takes Wanda to the stream to immerse herself and, under the shock of the extremely cold water, "they clung to each other as if undergoing martyrdom" (p.59). However, neither the cold water nor the premonition of suffering extinguishes their internal

²¹Laurie Colwin, "Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," New York Times Book Review, July 23, 1978, p.1, 24.

fire, and they "burned with the heat of newly lit kindling" (p. 59-60).

Jacob and Wanda join sexually above a sleeping world whose every proscription they are cognizant of violating. The raging storm affirms and symbolizes the tempestuousness of their feelings as well as adumbrates the turmoil their union is fated to occasion. They shock themselves with the intensity of their passion, and find that the cold shock of what they prophetically apprehend about their future fails to diminish their desire for each other. The lightning, which was transmuted by contact with Wanda into a heavenly glow, is but a mere flicker of the emotional conflagration that makes her scream with determination that she is ready to convert and to die for Jacob. It is the shimmering halo of spirituality which identifies her as Jacob's soul companion, as his fellow traveler in his journey to ascend above the quotidian. But it is also the perennial glow which surrounds them in their years together, the effulgence which constantly threatens to escape from the thick-walled, windowless alcove in which, "hidden from the world by a clump of trees" (p.131), they eventually enclose themselves to study together.

The exchange of knowledge and skills is part of the relationship from the very beginning. Wanda teaches Jacob how to reap, shows him how the scythe should be sharpened, and acquaints him with the stories and legends of her people. Jacob comes to relish physical activity and, ever since, "his

feet wanted movement, his hands demanded work" (p.205). When his body also asserts itself sexually, in the mating with the forbidden gentile woman, he has learned to value his physicality enough not to be ashamed before God (p.61). Jacob finds it easy to teach Wanda because she "has a man's brain" (p.30), and amazes herself and others by uttering words that have "the pithiness and wit of a bishop's talk" (p.30). His initial doubts about "a peasant's brain comprehending such profundities" soon disappear, and he is astounded at her posing problems that he cannot solve. He quickly realizes that "she lusted for knowledge almost as fiercely as she did for the flesh" (p.72) and, for the rest of his life, he remains faithful to these connected longings which link them. For the entire twenty years by which he outlives her, he honors the magnificence of their entwinement by refusing to remarry. As Dinah Pladott has noted, "Jacob is a man desired by many females but who nevertheless manages to retain his faithful love in his purity" (p.60). He imaginatively conjures Wanda/Sarah up and continues to explain "everything he studied . . . to Sarah [Wanda's Jewish name] in Yiddish, sometimes in Polish, as if she were sitting beside him" (p.237).

The appetites for learning and for each other which commingle so inextricably in Jacob and Wanda make it impossible for them to remain apart after Jacob is ransomed by his fellow Jews. Jacob is happy to regain his freedom but realizes at once that the differences between him and his

brethren have increased drastically and that, whereas he was always somewhat intellectually removed from his community (as Singer was after he had been modernized), he is now a true hybrid in whose head Yiddish and Polish mingle. He is embarrassed to speak before his rescuers, and he associates their smaller size with refinement and his greater height with coarseness. Inside the carriage which is carrying him out of captivity, he feels "penned in" (p.86). Later, the new species of confinement which is foreshadowed in this feeling, quickly takes its ominous shape. Back with his own people, and striving to extinguish his love for Wanda, Jacob finds himself with nothing else to hold on to. He cannot obey the commandment, "Thou Shalt Love Thy God" (p.91); notices that the fellow Jews he also wants to love "observed the laws and customs involving the Almighty, but broke the code regulating man's treatment of man with impunity" (p.99); and he is convinced that "the Jews had learned nothing from their ordeal, rather suffering had pushed them lower" (p.100). He rebukes himself for having "turned into a peasant" but remembers that he had always been different from his fellow Jews, who groaned and sighed without feeling while he burst with feelings (longing for Wanda and the grave) in silence. Newly freed from his physical captivity by his fellow Jews, he is now imprisoned in incompatibility with them and in loneliness.

Having been brought (by himself and by others) to such an extremity, Jacob enlists the assistance of his considerable scholarship to rationalize and sanction his return to Wanda. He discovers in the cabala that lust is of divine origin, that "coupling was the universal act underlying everything; Torah, prayer, the Commandments, God's holy names themselves were mysterious unions of the male and female principles" (p.111). He also remembers the analogy between him and his Biblical namesake, the Jacob who had gone to Haran for love of Rachel and had worked seven years to win her.

Before Jacob builds a strong scholarly case in favor of what he desires to do, he has already made this necessary by having a dream in which he "knows" that Wanda is pregnant. After he sees in his dream her tear-stained exhortation to do something for their child, he is sure of the course to take since "the law obliged him to rescue Wanda and his child from the idolaters" (p.102). In the dream Wanda brings with her the smell of fields and haystacks and, as soon as Jacob sets out to find her, he realizes that "he had missed not only Wanda but this [the open spaces]. The stale air of Josefov had been unbearable, windows tightly shut, nothing but books all day . . . the body required use as well as the soul. It was good for men to haul, drag, chop, run, perspire, to hunger and thirst and become weary" (p.112). Though he is about to isolate himself and Wanda in the confines of a socially and religiously proscribed union, he is breathing again, feeling

both the power of his body and the irrepressibility of his questioning mind--as he wonders about infinity and time (p.113)--and of his playful imagination.

Having perceived the freedom bought by his ransomers as a more grievous form of captivity than his previous state, Jacob goes back to the daughter of his previous confiner and with Wanda, now named Sarah, he begins a life of self-imposed captivity in the freedom of their defiant attachment. Wanda/Sarah has to pretend she is mute to conceal her non-Jewishness, and she is forced to patiently listen to the slander and ridicule the other women in town (assuming that she is also deaf) feel free to express in her presence.

Jacob has to build a house with very thick walls and lives in terror of their being discovered. He muses that "his years of enforced slavery had been succeeded by a slavery that would last as long as he lived," and justifies himself for the transgression of marrying a gentile by remembering that "he had saved a soul from idolatry" (p.132). But, on the other hand, they have the pleasures of studying together, "whispered to each other for hours without tiring" (p.133), and found their time together so precious that they would deem an evening wasted if they had guests because then "there would be no studying of the Torah" together in the windowless alcove (p.165). Wanda/Sarah is so happy that she sometimes terrifies Jacob. She forgets that she is supposed to be mute and breaks into song (132). She also "often wished that the night would

last forever and she could continue to listen to his words and receive his caresses" (136). Jacob, though oppressed by the fear of discovery and of imperiling not just himself and Wanda/Sarah but also the Jewish town in which they live, willingly conceals his scholarly knowledge and status. He seems perfectly satisfied to conduct himself as a scholar only with his wife, is half scandalized, half amused by her mistakes, and frequently laughs at her mispronunciations of Yiddish words. They are quite happy and Jacob is tolerant enough to overlook the fact that Wanda's head is not shaven; in violation of Jewish practice, she cuts her own hair (p.132). The beautiful, riotous ringlets are the symbol of their love and their peril. They are barely contained under the kerchief and frequently succeed in spilling out. Wanda and Jacob know that like the gorgeous hair, their affair will inevitably out.

Childbirth, just as Jacob always feared, is the event that denounces the loving couple. In the throes of a difficult labor, Wanda\Sarah, angry at the insensitive comments of the many women in the room, forgets that she is supposed to be mute and yells in Yiddish: "don't bury me yet, I'm not dead" (p.184). Suddenly, history catches up with Jacob and Wanda. Their room, in which through sexual love, intellectual communion, and artful concealment they satisfied their craving for emotion and for intimacy, is now a theater of natural and social life. They cease to be two individuals in love who have

attained great happiness in secret spaces of their own creation, and become part of their community; they are claimed by history and by nature.

At this point The Slave can be clearly seen as the counterpart of Satan in Goray. In both novels a woman's bedchamber becomes the center stage of the community; a dybbuk takes, or is presumed to take, a protagonistic role; there are revelations of the hypocrisy and sinfulness concealed under righteous surfaces; and death in childbirth or its equivalent is the fate of the females.

In Satan in Goray, Rechele "fell prisoner in the net of the Outer Ones and a dybbuk possessed her."²² The entire community, including the town elders, crowd into the room as Rechele "lay with parted legs like a woman in labor" (p.206). The dybbuk, speaking through her with a man's voice, first recounts Reb Gedaliya's sins, accusing him of having defiled his own wife, Rechele, and of having polluted the entire community. Later, the dybbuk also "reckoned up the secret sins of each one and called them by name and . . . no one dared give the dybbuk the lie and he grew bolder and discovered things that had lain hidden, giving clear signs of proof" (p.216). Eventually, the dybbuk is exorcised and "there is such a press for very terror that many folk were trampled" (pp.220-221). In a scene which merits sober feminist

²²Isaac Bashevis Singer, Satan in Goray (New York: Fawcet Crest, 1980) p. 206. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

attention, the dybbuk, which had originally entered Rechele through the vagina, leaves the same way as a flash of fire which "flew through the window burning a round whole in the pane" (p.221). Rechele, whose strength had come from the spirit, dies after a couple of days.

In The Slave, as soon as Wanda\Sarah goes into labor, she and Jacob lose all privacy and their room is filled with so many people that there is "a crush in the room {and} the bed on which Sarah lay was almost broken" (p.185). When Wanda\Sarah had spoken in Yiddish the women in the room had interpreted the event as a miracle. However, when the language changes to the Polish of a gentile, everybody agrees that it is a dybbuk speaking. More confusion ensues, people jam the room and even schoolchildren try to shove their way in. Wanda/Sarah, in pain, seeing her end near, and irritated by the situation, behaves like a dybbuk and tells the truth: "'you call yourself Jews but don't obey the Torah. You pray and bow your heads but you speak evil of everyone and begrudge each other a crust of bread. Gershon, the man who rules you, is a swindler. He robbed a Jew whom the Cossacks killed and because of that his son-in-law is a rabbi'" (p.187). Wanda/Sarah dies soon after giving birth to a son.

Before she dies, however, she and Jacob have one last moment together. They once more elude the reality which, as shown by the birth scene, they had been right in deflecting because it could have permanently brought some of the

corruption of the world into their lives. Once the baby is born, people return in fear to their own homes (Wanda's crime is a capital one according to gentile law), and Jacob and Wanda/Sarah are able to return to the proscribed and private realm of their transgressing but sustaining love. Wanda/Sarah has earlier told Lord Pilitzky that she loves Jacob and regrets nothing (p.192), and now Jacob sees her dying and he realizes that she "is a better representative of . . . true Judaism than are most of the Jews."²³ He is sure that she is "a saint, a thousand times better than any of the others" (p.196), and that "if such as she must burn in Gehenna, then there was even inequity in heaven" (p.197). He feels "a love such as he had never known before" (p.198), and his only desire is to die with her.

But instead of dying, Jacob is taken prisoner by Polish soldiers, remembers his son as he is being led away in chains, realizes that "nowhere was it written that a man must consent to his own destruction" (p.206), and escapes. In his dreams, Wanda/Sarah comes to him with promises of protection and, from there on, she never seems to abandon him. He recovers his son, takes him to the holy land, brings him up to be a scholar, and then comes back to Pilitz to retrieve her bones. There he dies and is buried next to Wanda/Sarah under the epitaph: "Lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not

²³Theodore L. Steinberg, "I. B. Singer: Responses to Catastrophe," Yiddish 4 (Spring, 1975): 10.

divided" (p.254). He and Wanda Sarah finally reach "unity beyond the limitations of time."²⁴

Though the novel ends with a burial, it validates the love of two protagonists who never clipped the wings of their inclinations and affections, and who remained, if not openly defiant of conventions (since that was never their intention), at least certain of each other, of the fact that they belonged together physically and spiritually. For Jacob and Wanda/Sarah, "sexual love is a mark of . . . [their] personal psychic integration, wholeness and well-being."²⁵ This is demonstrated by their religious sincerity and enlightenment, which makes them admirable people and also hints at benefits for others. Their love for each other as well as the hybridization both of them underwent in order to stay together, are transformed by the author into a bridge between two traditionally contending cultures and faiths.

People can come together by recognizing what is good in others and by regarding one's own creeds skeptically and one's own group impartially. David Seed says that "Jacob's spiritual idealism brings him into conflict with those around him."²⁶ This is true about Jacob, particularly with fellow-Jews when

²⁴Mary L. Collar, "In His Father's House: Singer, Folklore, and the Meaning of Time," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1, (1981): 49.

²⁵Bonnie Lyons, "Sexual Love in I. B. Singer's Work," Studies in Jewish American Literature 1 (1981): 61.

²⁶David Seed, "The Community in I. B. Singer's Fiction," Yiddish 4. 2 (1980): 12.

they dwell in envy and jealousy instead of loving one another. Goodness and holiness are qualities Jacob values; he detects and acknowledges these attributes in others, whether Jew, gentile, or atheist, and at crucial points in the novel good non-Jews lend him a helping hand. Thus the peasant Jan Bzik enslaves him but is also a good Christian who protects him. When Jacob journeys to find Wanda, an old man wearing a rosary and a crucifix shows him the way and blesses him, and Jacob thinks that "if it had not been for the cross he wore, the old man might have been mistaken for the prophet Elijah" (p.112). Of course, he also considers the possibility that the old man might be "an emissary of Esau, sent by those powers who wished Jews and gentiles to mate" (p.112), but that doesn't interfere with his gratitude, nor does it deviate him from his purpose searching for Wanda. Later, when Jacob is running away from the gentile law, Waclaw, the ferryman, gives him food and allows him to hide in his hut, even though he suspects that Jacob's "head must be worth a couple of grivniks" (p.214). Waclaw is an atheist who asserts that "God owns everything but the rich receive it all" (p.211), and he provides an invaluable service by engaging in a discussion about slavery and freedom which emphasizes the enslaving nature not only of property but also of sexual desire and of affection. Jacob falls asleep after this and wakes up thinking about what to do concerning the baby still left with a wet-nurse in Pilitz. An emissary from the Holy Land, who later

brings Jacob into his circle of Sabbatai Zevi followers, gives Jacob money to go for the baby.

Because Jacob is receptive to what is good in everybody, he does not easily fall for fads and seems immune to fanaticism. The Sabbatai Zevi frenzy, which Singer shows playing such havoc in Satan in Goray, touches Jacob only superficially. Jacob concludes that "even as a child he had been a misfit. Despite his brief association with the followers of Sabbatai Zevi (and even there he had been on the outer fringe), he had always remained aloof" (p.241). But it is this aloofness that keeps him aloft and that allows his and Wanda/Sara's goodness to prevail to the point of their envisioning the Jewish Paradise (in accord with the Talmud but not with general belief) as a place in which even Jan Bzik, Wanda's peasant father, is a saint (p.251).

The Slave re-writes Paradise and reverses ordinary notions regarding what is best in religion. Though The Slave is about 17th century Poland, it is the complete obverse of Satan in Goray, where the forces of history and of religious excesses intertwine to create deep individual and collective degradation and confusion. In The Slave, religious doubt prevails over fanaticism and even over certainty, and the serious infraction of the protagonists does not, as it was supposed to, in any way harm anyone else, as the excessive religious belief did in Goray. Elsie Levitan claims that "The Slave exemplifies Singer's supremest theme--the way to God is

within the law."²⁷ If this is so, Jacob and Wanda will never see God since they succeed in their love by violating the laws about marriage and conversion. The law for Jacob is something to question and to judiciously break; blind obedience to anything is foreign to Jacob and also to Wanda, as it is to their author, Singer.

I mentioned Singer's belief that in this novel God prevails. It is necessary to clarify that the cruel God with whom Singer (and Jacob) obstinately wage battle prevails to the extent that the lovers have only nine years of togetherness under less than ideal circumstances, after which they are separated by death. But Singer was actually referring to a benevolent facet of the Creator. In this case, he must have been thinking about the fact that the love between the protagonists proves long lasting and they are united in death after a life of never really being spiritually apart. Singer himself is the "benevolent facet" of the creator who contrives the triumph of love in this novel, but he does not find it easy to do so.

Singer as almighty author creates two characters who must be "hoverers" in order to obtain the ostensibly simple goals of being themselves and of loving each other. To hover is to reach for omnipotence. It is the desire to be above others in order to benefit from the dominance which comes from seeing

²⁷Elsie Levitan, "The Cosmos of Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Critical View," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 142.

more. Jacob's superior "sight," his enlightened and humane interpretation of religious doctrine, makes him a true Jew, while others only muddle in the abyss of their human frailty, serving God through exaggerated ritual because they cannot find it in themselves to be fair to one another. Wanda/Sarah, who does not even have the advantage of a knowledge-valuing religion, has an innate appetite for learning and joins the Jewish community in a condition that allows her to violate their space and their intimacy. As a supposed deaf/mute, she has secret access to things she should not be hearing; she hovers above the community, "seeing" its members at their worst. Jacob and Sarah, who were also genetically superior to their group and blessed with enviable willfulness, become "winged" through their love and fly over the community by, paradoxically, locking themselves in their windowless alcove to talk, love, and study. The windowless alcove is a statement of their scorn (and fear) of the world as it is, a concretization of their aloof superiority.

Singer seems to be implying that to attain individuality and love, the most essential things in life, is not possible unless one is unusually gifted and strong. Only through superiority and the omnipotence of the artist can love like this exist, but even then, despite Singer's and his protagonists' superiority (and also because of it), Singer finds it impossible to have Jacob and Wanda achieve what they

desire openly and makes them triumph through (atoning) self-imprisonment, allowing them permanent union only after death.

Thus Singer affirms the desire for a special relationship between the sexes but recognizes the nearly insurmountable difficulties involved in achieving it. These difficulties are predominant in some of the short fiction, where, "on the whole, women are manipulated by men and used as pawns in their games."²⁸ The Slave, on the contrary, depicts a marital union based on equality. It is true that Wanda has to convert to Judaism and abandon her entire family and community while Jacob can retain his religion and live among Jews. But it is equally true that Jacob is not at home among his own people and disapproves of their religious practices. He and Wanda/Sarah are only comfortable with one another and with their own personal religion. Their loving confederacy is very unique and through it we can glean the characteristics of the love Singer and his heroes seek to seize from this imperfect world. This ideal relationship must contain sexual attraction, camaraderie, a preference for privacy, a talent for creative intimacy, and a desire to study and grow together. It must be a union of people who like Wanda, lust "for knowledge almost as fiercely as [they do] for the flesh" (p.72), and who are willing to defy the world for what they want.

²⁸Evelyn Torton Beck, "The Many Faces of Eve: Women, Yiddish, and Isaac Bashevis Singer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 117.

In its fearlessness before conventionality and in its steadfastness, the love affair between Jacob and Wanda resembles that of Singer's short story "The Unseen."²⁹ Rosie Temerl is lawfully married to the man she loves but, misguided by a wicked maid, he abandons her, and sends her a divorce. When he returns repentant, she cannot take him back into the home because she herself has remarried, but she hides him away in an old building in the courtyard and resumes her marital relations with him. So strong is the bond of love, and so much a product of the human imagination and intellect that the story claims that "when a husband and wife sleep on one pillow they have the same head" (Gimpel 173).

The Family Moskat: Asa Heshel, Theoretician of Love.

A considerable portion of Singer's fiction explores the possibilities of attaining the fusion of hearts and minds of Rosie and her husband and the suprasocial happiness enjoyed by Jacob and Wanda. And though Jacob and Wanda are the brief realization of the search for love the long fiction carries out,³⁰ chronologically The Slave is preceded and followed by novels in which the search is conducted in a variety of

²⁹Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Unseen" Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories (New York: Noonday Press, 1957). Hereafter cited as Gimpel.

³⁰In Isaac Bashevis Singer's Shosha (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1978), the love between Aaron Greidinger and Shosha is fulfilled, but it is not an affair between equals since Shosha has failed to grow up, and since only she is faithful.

manners by heroes who resemble Jacob in many ways but never quite rise to his level.

The first of Singer's heroes to embark in a search for love and personal answers is Asa Heshel in The Family Moskat.³¹ Asa is a sort of double of his author and, through him, Singer both camouflages and expresses himself. Like the young man of the memoirs, Asa Heshel Bannet comes from a very pious background which he is quietly turning away from because he "yearns for God and for justice but [has come] to the conclusion that the two are irreconcilable," he regards God as "an obstacle not a means to life. Turning away, he tries to expend and to exchange his love for the divine for the love of the human and the world."³² Accordingly, Asa indulges his great appetite for secular learning, and pursues a special type of connection with women. The son of a rabbinical family, Asa Heshel comes to Warsaw in search of broader intellectual horizons, proceeds immediately to shed all the outward signs of his Hasidic background by shaving his beard and trying out both the civilian and military gentile attires, walks around in a perpetual state of wonderment, meditates on Spinoza and Darwin trying to reconcile their philosophies, and moves on to fall in love with one woman, marry another, and have an affair with a third, while continuing to fantasize that he is "a

³¹Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Family Moskat (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1950) Hereafter cited as Moskat.

³²Irving H. Buchen, Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past (New York: New York University Press, 1968) p.46.

maharajah with eighteen wives, lovely women of India, Persia, Arabia, Egypt--and a few particularly beautiful Jewesses" (Moskat 376-377). He cannot live without women, and women respond very positively to him, but he is terrified of domestic and parental responsibility and finds that "the more Adele's pregnancy advanced the stronger was his desire to run away. He could foresee the whole frantic mess: the confinement, the midwife, the hospital, the doctors" (Moskat 313). Later, married to Hadassah whom he loved, Asa Heshel tells her: "I'm sick of all this family stuff" (Moskat 475) and confides to Abram Shapiro: "Abram, I'm not a family man" (p.534), "I want to leave everything and get away" (p.535).

Asa Heshel's rejection of reproduction extends beyond the personal. He believes that "when conditions are better, more brats are born, and the need is just the same" (p. 399), that the Ten Commandments lacked all preciseness because "he who said 'Thou shalt not kill' should also have said 'Thou shalt not beget'" (p.403), and he maintains that there should be "more sex and fewer children," and that "the bedroom is the key to all social and individual problems" (p.497).

Though it would be easy to prove that Asa is a misogynist, it is also true that in seeing the bedroom as the key to all social and individual problems, he is implying that this is a situation that can only be remedied by men and women together. Robert Forrey maintains that "the cancer at the heart of human relationships, the destructive force that

divides humanity in Enemies, is not essentially political, racial, or religious--it is sexual."³³ This is true not just in Enemies but in all of Singer's work, and Asa Heshel is the first protagonist to transform this belief into a theory to live by. It seems to me that he sees despair as originating mainly from the separation of men and women and that he considers the true unity of the sexes as indispensable for the happy survival of the species. What is amiss in the pairing of men and women must be repaired so that it won't impair the health of society, or even threaten the survival of the human race. Asa seems to be looking for a source of stability in the erotic, as though he knew that there is no separation between politics and eroticism, that for as long as male and females are severed, there cannot be political and social stability either. Asa Heshel's surface misogynism, the almost desperate strife for a true meshing of male and female, and the apparent conviction that the happiness and health (maybe even the survival) of mankind depend on the types of connections men and women can make with one another pervade all of Singer's works. "Asa Heshel is a self-portrait" (Sinclair 159) as well as the prototype of Singer's male protagonists, and he takes new shape in Yasha Mazur, the magician of Lublin.

³³Robert Forrey, "The Sorrows of Herman Broder: Singer's Enemies, A Love Story," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 101.

CHAPTER V
THE MAGICIAN OF LUBLIN

Satan in Goray (1935) is about a town, and The Family Moskat (1950) is a family saga. The Magician of Lublin¹ is the first novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer which is exclusively about an individual, and it is the most paradigmatic and personal of all his long works. It plays with all of Singer's obsessive concerns, fantasies and conceits, and shows how "a writer is always shocked by the laws of life, (how) he suffers a chronic discontent."² Yasha Mazur, the protagonist of The Magician of Lublin, embodies Isaac Bashevis Singer's most grandiose ambitions and most paralyzing fears; he is Singer himself "glory[ing] in the aristocracy of his imagination."³ Through Yasha, Singer expresses his ambivalent endorsement of the outrageous desires of mankind, as well as his imagination's exasperation at (and occasionally bitter

¹Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Magician of Lublin (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1960. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

²Francine Ringold, "'My Dear Friend' Isaac Bashevis Singer, An Interview," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 161.

³Clive Sinclair, The Brothers Singer (London and New York: Allison & Busby, 1983) p. 24.

acquiescence in) the restrictions imposed by flesh and mortality on the schemes devised by the sovereignty-seeking mind. Yasha Mazur is an acknowledgement of the human need, most pronounced in writers and magicians, to retain illusion as the source of courage in the enterprise of attempting to rectify imaginatively the limiting circumstances to which nature condemns us. In this novel the search for love is coterminous with the yearning for supreme human accomplishment. Seeking great professional achievement and striving to gain the satisfactions of a relationship with a cultivated and intelligent woman, Yasha thrusts himself into the world in manic pursuit of his objectives, only to find out that "one of the most terrible facts about human freedom is that man is given the right to lose it."⁴

Yasha Mazur is obviously the continuation of the young Isaac of the memoirs and autobiographical stories for children. At age forty, Yasha is still having fantasies of controlling armies, locating buried treasures, and becoming the emperor of the world (p.75). These fantasies are indistinguishable from those of Singer at eleven, who dreamt "now I was an emperor and now a sorcerer; now I donned a cap that rendered me invisible, and now I flew to the moon and brought back treasures of gold and diamonds and a potion that

⁴Mary L. Collar, "In His Father's House: Singer, Folklore, and the Meaning of Time," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 43.

rendered me wiser than King Solomon and stronger than Samson."⁵ Paul Kresh identifies Yasha Mazur with Isaac Bashevis Singer and bemoans Yasha's "self-administered punishment in the end" as "gratuitous, tendentious."⁶ Ruth Wisse asserts that, like Yasha, "Singer renounces the tightrope of all his worldly quest and embraces the trustful ingenuousness of the past as his one true bride."⁷ Yasha's renunciations deserve so much attention because he renounced a profession which wishful-thinking humanity finds metaphorically resonant.

Yasha Mazur's profession makes him the most apt representative of human illusion. He deals in magic, the precursor of science. And magic is the most appropriate profession for trying to contend not only with Yasha's outlandish fantasies, unappeasable longings, and immoderate lusts, but also with Isaac Bashevis Singer's. Magic is the best way to give expression to Singer's fondness for adopting the role of a classical hero perpetually engaged in a personal and professional struggle with God and nature. With Yasha Mazur, Singer claims the artist's prerogative to be godlike

⁵Isaac Bashevis Singer, Stories for Children (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984) p.223.

⁶Paul Kresh, The Magician of West 86th Street (New York: The Dial Press, 1979) p. 213.

⁷Ruth R. Wisse, "Singer's Paradoxical Progress," Studies in American Jewish Literature. 1-2 (1981-82): 158.

and to combat fate and nature in his efforts to achieve the super human.

Yasha's greatest aspiration is, like the word "aspiration" itself, an airy one. He wants to fly. He dreams of it frequently at night and wakes up "with the sensation that a distorted kind of reality"(p.46) has been revealed to him. This distorted reality is something he is determined to achieve, even though he knows that "many of those who'd tried to fly had been killed." He mentally argues that "they had flown, if only temporarily" (p.47), and that the deed can be accomplished by the right person who uses the right materials and devises the proper apparatuses. He dreams of flying "over the rooftops of Warsaw or better still--Rome, Paris, or London" (p.47).

Singer the magician and writer (Kresh acknowledges the two to be one in the title of his book on Singer, The Magician of West 86th Street) has chosen revealing language⁸ for the airy Yasha. What is unveiled in Yasha's dreams is not referred to as a "modified" or "enhanced" reality but as a "distorted"

⁸It is well-known that Singer carefully controlled his English translations. David Neal Miller, Fear of Fiction (New York: State University of New York Press, 1985) p. viii, says "Indeed, few of Singer's translators even know Yiddish; they work, as a rule, from Singer's verbal ad hoc translations." Ruth Whitman, "Translating Isaac Bashevis Singer," Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) Whitman found Singer's method of translation frustrating and says, "only in one instance, in the story 'Cock-a-Doodle-Do' (published in Hadassah Magazine) was I allowed to take the Yiddish text home and work over it . . ." (p.46).

one; something not entirely pleasant may be afoot. Yasha begins his reflection on the matter by thinking that a man should be able to accomplish what a bird could do so easily: "If a bird could do it why not man?" (p.47). From birds he moves to an almost repulsive creature as if in intimation of something unpalatable; he considers imitating the webs of a bat to assist buoyancy. Finally he thinks of eagles and hawks and muses that "they could even lift a lamb and fly away with it" (p.47). This chain of associations ends with birds of prey, with carnivorous, keen-eyed creatures which dominate the sky and can easily pick their victims from above. Yasha starts with the simple desire to be aloft (which could be interpreted as a wish for simple physical and aesthetic exaltation, and which in The Slave took the form of perfect communion between man and woman) and concludes with a disclosure of his ultimately predatory aims. The image of the lamb in the talons of the bird of prey prompts one to think about Halina, the teen-ager Yasha should regard as a daughter, but for whom he has "woven a net in readiness to ensnare her" (p.178) sexually. Singer's and Yasha's fantasies have darkened under the pressure of adult sexuality.

And it is sexually that Yasha approaches the world. Sex is what he is most interested in and sex sets the entire pattern of his life. At one point Yasha thinks with distaste about his mind whirling to the rhythm of a street organ (p.86), but his mind is under the dominance of a very

different organ. As a magician and lover of several women, Yasha can only face the world with a taut body, a body readied for great feats on the tightrope and under the covers. His life, mind and moods follow the rhythm of male sexuality, a phallic rhythm of high and low and of up and down. Yasha's existence is characterized by alternating cycles of action and lethargy, periods of bright and dark moods, and periods of striving for social, professional, intellectual and spiritual improvement interspersed with episodes of life in the gutter.

We first meet Yasha Mazur when he is undergoing a period of drowsiness and sluggishness. After one of his trips, he is back in Lublin and has taken to his bed, suffering from a weariness which "required the indulgence of continual sleep" (p.7). He eats the food that his wife Esther brings him and promptly goes back to sleep. Later, in Warsaw, every burst of activity is also followed by a retreat into lassitude. Magda, his assistant and mistress with whom he shares an apartment, cannot understand how he can sleep so much. But like Esther, she also feeds him between naps and, in addition, she discloses the fact that, though he is healthy, "he sometimes grew weak as a fly, fell in a faint and lay as if in a seizure" (p.126). His moods also swing from one extreme to another; "one moment he crowed elatedly like a rooster, squealed like a pig, whinnied like a horse, and the next was inexplicably melancholy" (p.15).

Socially and intellectually, Yasha also adheres to this pattern of drastic highs and lows. His ambitions are embodied by Emilia, a professor's widow whom he plans to marry after divorcing Esther and converting to Catholicism, and with whom he can discuss religion, philosophy, and the immortality of the soul (p.70). However, Yasha seems to find the company of lowlifes and thieves irresistible, and spends considerable time and energy with the thieves of Piask and with Herman the pimp. In part, this seems to be because Yasha, when on his cycle of activity, needs to project himself into different social levels and groups, to have active incursions into different ways of life. But also, stealing attracts Yasha and he equates himself with those who have to steal money because "he had to steal love" (p.52). Is he aware that he is not just a thief of female hearts but also a thief at heart?

Theft is inherent in a magician's job, for in his competition with nature and/or with God, a magician seeks to steal some of their power and secrets. Theft is also the lot of the writer. Singer "stole" many of his stories from the folklore of the shtetl and from the particular folklore of his own family. However, his greatest theft was not of stories but of skills. Rather than adopting his parents' oral storytelling skills, Singer stole them. He appropriated the oral tradition,⁹ which was used in the Singer family as an adhesive

⁹The culture of the Singer home was based on the Talmud, a written document. However, as Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy (New York: Methuen 1982), points out: "The Talmud,

force, and transformed it into written literature, something very different in form, in use, and in effect.

Oral fiction is a process rather than a product or an end. It is an art that takes shape as it is being performed, that modifies itself in the telling as it picks up feedback from the audience. It curves with the sinuous lines of give and take. As such, oral fiction does not project itself but instead blends and fuses with the milieu. In oral narration, mediation is reduced and language is tangible because of the energy that is being released in ostensible--and frequently real--spontaneity. This energy is called "power" by Walter J. Ong: "oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power. Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power" (p.32). Oral storytelling conveys a feeling of certitude which dispels uneasiness and has a calming effect. Oral narration is a sublime whistling in the dark because it seems so comprehensive and self-sufficient. The mouth out of which the language (made with the tongue's help) flies is autoerotic, complete; it is both female space and internality, and male projection and motility. And the mouth requires the ear in visible attendance, a tangible audience for language at its most concrete.

though a text, is still vocalized by highly oral Orthodox Jews [like Singer's father] in Israel" (p.67). Ong uses the phrase "verbomotor style" to refer to these cultures which know "writing but [remain] basically oral and word-oriented in lifestyle" (p.68).

The written literature into which Singer transformed his oral legacy is more useful in the quest for autonomy of imagination than oral literature. Writing "intensifies the sense of self" (Ong, p.179). For written literature is a pursuit conducted away from the intended audience and it reaches this audience only when it has been readied for insertion into its fabric. Though written literature is partially a collective product, its composition and consumption take place in solitary conditions. The author is alone with his creation. Like God, or like a magician, he needs no help to conjure up new universes of experience and emotion. His work cannot be immediately amended by the audience because feedback is delayed. And so is reward. Written literature is long-term. Even in cases like those of Singer's serial novels published in The Daily Forward, in which there was a certain responsiveness to the audience, written literature is not primarily interested in the immediate pleasures of sensuous, circular interaction with the group. Singer's writing stretches out in a straight, phallic line of premeditated purpose (For, as Ong says, "writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind" p.39). It seeks exactness and focus because it aims for permanence. And it pursues this permanence competitively, even aggressively. It strives to modify, curtail or subdue what it dislikes, and it doesn't stop short of wanting to defeat nature and to surpass God. It doesn't blend and fuse with the

audience but rather attempts to rally it for battle. It wishes to enlist it in the fight for increasing the territory and power of the human will.

Writing also "introduces division and alienation" (Ong. p.179). In the Singer family, the transformation of oral tradition into written literature irretrievably separated them. It divided the three practitioners of the art--Hinde Esther, Joshua, and Isaac--from their parents, and caused Pinchos to feel ashamed of his scribbling children and to lie about their profession. Singer told Mark S. Golub: "my father used to tell people when they asked him, 'What are your sons doing?' he would say, 'They sell newspapers.'"¹⁰ But writing also worked like a magic wand of salvation; it was instrumental for their survival. Pinchos died of natural causes and Bathsheba and her pious youngest son, Moishe, perished during the Second World War, while Hinde, Joshua, and Isaac made it out of the dangerous zones because of their writing ability and lived to write about their experience. All of which intensified Isaac's sense of infraction, without making his profession and personal inclinations any easier to relinquish.

So too with Yasha, who recognizes that he is stealing love but seems unable to behave differently. His pursuit of sex is totally amoral (like Singer's pursuit of art); it is an

¹⁰Mark S. Golub, "A Shmues with Isaac Bashevis Singer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 171.

enterprise of conquest and emotional/sexual exploitation, in which his goal is to acquire lovers but never to give one up. Two of his women he uses in rites of renewal, and the other two are embodiments of his contradictory tendencies to aspire high and yet to be fascinated by the very low.

Esther and Magda, Yasha's wife and assistant, in addition to being the ones with whom Yasha spends his periods of lethargy and replenishment, retain the allure of the new, of the uncolonized (which is in turn uncolonizing). With Esther, Yasha has developed no real intimacy. He conceals a great deal from her and, though they have been married twenty years, "Esther's small talk might have been exchanged with a casual acquaintance" (p.12). Yasha does not seem to mind this, nor does he have any objection to the fact that "the long periods of separation had preserved in them the eagerness of newlyweds" (p.29). But to judge from the author's emphasis, what Yasha seems to like best about Esther is that "as soon as he put his arm around her she was aroused, like an adolescent--since a woman who has not been pregnant, remains virginal forever" (p.30). Magda replicates this sexual situation almost exactly. Magda comes to Yasha "like a timid virgin" (p.47), and their re-acquaintance is always "like a wedding night. She lay with her back to him and he had to court her silently to make her turn to him" (p.48). Both Esther and Magda give Yasha the illusion of newness, a repeated and invigorating feeling of primacy.

But the two women also offer more than the aggressive satisfactions of the continual seduction of virginity. Esther reconnects Yasha to his group and his religion. Though Yasha is not pious and does not even wear a beard, Esther conducts herself like a proper Jewish matron and observes the religious holidays. In fact, Yasha comes to Esther only for the Jewish holidays; at the beginning of the novel, she is his synagogue, the only temple he consents to visit. His repeated deflowerings of her are also incursions into his past and culture, attempts to possess a legacy which is still unclaimed, unused, virginal.

Magda and Yasha are not linked by culture or religion since she is a Polish Catholic, but they are joined by the activity with which they make their living. She represents virgin territory in the profession. His dreams and thoughts of flying are all connected with her. He dreams of flying in her bed, as he dozes off while waiting for her. Her slimness, a bird-like airiness of bone, makes him feel that flight would be easy for her, and he actually promises to put wings on her and make her fly (p. 47-49). And though Magda realistically interprets Yasha's promise metaphorically and declares that their lovemaking is making her fly already, she revives Yasha's desire for professional renovation, and reaffirms his conviction in the possibilities of taking wing.

Emilia and Zefel are the extreme social points of high and low in Yasha's life. They represent his exacerbation of

desiring refinement and intellectual/spiritual development and his exasperation at having to confront the unavoidable grossness and muddledness of daily life. Irving Howe asserts that Emilia "represents for (Yasha)--the symbolism is clear but not insistent--the attractions of the outer cultivated world he had never been able to reach and conquer."¹¹ This certainly seems to be the case. Since the advent of Emilia, Yasha's mind is never quiet and he reflects that he has "evolved into a real philosopher. Now instead of swallowing his beer, he rolled the bitterness around his tongue, gums, and palate" (p.18). With Emilia, he can discuss religion and philosophy and speak about Copernicus and Galileo (p.70). Yasha, who is as hungry for information and as filled with questions as any of Singer's male protagonists, thinks of her as the only miracle in his life (p.87). But Emilia is also the bitterness (as in the rolling of the beer) of not being in control. As Evelyn Torton Beck has remarked, she is the woman Yasha really wants because she is "the one woman who does not acquiesce to Yasha sexually."¹² He sees her image day and night, hungers for her asleep and awake, and cannot wait to be back in Warsaw to see her again (p.23-24). In addition, Emilia, as befits her higher position, requires some strenuous

¹¹Irving Howe, "Demonic Fiction of a Yiddish Modernist," Commentary (October 1960): 352.

¹²Evelyn Torton Beck, "The Many Faces of Eve: Women, Yiddish, and Isaac Bashevis Singer," Studies in American Jewish Literature, 1 (1981): 119.

climbing and some sacrifices. She wants Yasha to divorce his wife, convert to Catholicism, and raise enough money for them to go together to Italy. For the first time in his life Yasha finds that "it was not he who had magnetized her, but the other way around" (p.29). Emilia, in other words, is the magician in this particular relationship. She has usurped Yasha's position, robbed him of the one thing that elevated him slightly above the sordid and the quotidian. If he bungles the ascent toward her, there will be no hope of Yasha's ever attaining Emilia or of his becoming a world-famous magician. Indeed this is what eventually happens. When Yasha confesses his failure as a thief and as the raiser of the money, Emilia unhesitatingly flings him down to the level where he belongs: "you stem from offal, and you are offal" (p.222), she says.

Yasha is Emilia's offal and Zefitel is Yasha's: "what was he looking for on top of this dung-heap" (p.51), he asks himself. Zefitel is an abandoned wife in Piask with whom Yasha is having yet another affair. She lives on a hill behind the slaughterhouse (the place Singer most loves to detest), wears jewelry even on weekdays, keeps her head uncovered, and cooks on the Sabbath. Yasha does not understand why he comes to her "through back-alleys" but cannot help feel "the fear and anticipation of a young schoolboy about to go to bed with his first woman" (51). Though (and also perhaps because) Zefitel is the opposite of virginal, and even of faithful, Zefitel makes him feel virginal, and for this reason Yasha is willing to put

up with something that "was all humiliating to him, the kissing, the offering of the present, the waiting while she fetched the coffee with chicory" (p.52). He also dutifully listens to her because "a woman who is loquacious is passionately so" (p.52). But there is more to it than that, ZefTEL's words "shot out--smooth and round, like peas from a peashooter" (p.52). This woman possesses verbal marksmanship, and marksmanship is something magicians (and writers) both dread and value. And indeed, ZefTEL, who is Yasha's social undertow, pulls him even lower. She digs out some of the moral offal secreted under the magician's green trousers and black, silver-sequined vest. Referring to Emilia and her daughter, Halina, ZefTEL gets to the point and directly asks Yasha which one he really loves. Yasha is as direct and concise; he answers "both" (p.55).

Halina, Emilia's fourteen year-old daughter, is Yasha's most difficult moral test. She exercises her woman-in-training rights by openly flirting with Yasha, but she is a sickly child in need of protection. However, Yasha, who is both lover and father to Magda (p.40), has fantasies of Emilia "kissing, embracing, showering him with affection" (p.29) and of Halina being there too. He eventually recognizes the horror of his lust for this child (p.178), but it is clear that he sees her as a woman, not just in his moments of lust, but also in those of resentment. Angry at Emilia, and feeling generally exploited by everybody, Yasha concludes: "while he was roaming

about doing performances, risking his neck daily, [Emilia] would hold a salon and invite guests, seek a match for Halina. . . . They're all the same. Each of them a spider" (p.116). This is an example of the frequent (but not unmitigated) misogyny in Singer's work, and it is harsh judgment for Yasha to pass on the only child in his life.

Neither Yasha the magician nor Singer the writer shows much interest in siring or nurturing children. Dorothea Straus, seeing Israel Zamir, Singer's only son (by his mistress Runya), muses that Israel "had been separated from his father in infancy, and they have remained virtual strangers."¹³ She also notes that Singer rarely speaks of his grandchildren and wonders if the author recognizes his son's x-ray blue eyes, which are identical to his own, as a particular act of magic, or if he is closer to his literary creations (the products of his magic rather than nature's) than to his next of kin. It is hard to say. But it is easy to see that children are a problem in Singer's fiction and that in The Magician of Lublin this is made explicit.

Yasha could very well be sterile, since he has relations with so many women but none of them gets pregnant. But familiarity with Singer's life and work argues against that possibility, and a close reading of the novel supports some different reasons for Yasha's not having any children. Esther,

¹³Dorothea Straus, Under the Canopy (New York: George Braziller, 1982) p. 64.

who believes that she is not capable of conceiving, thinks that Yasha "was both son and husband to her" (pp.13-14), but she does not suspect that this could be to Yasha's liking. With Magda, however, the situation is clarified; "she was prepared to bear Yasha an illegitimate (child). But he robbed her even of that. He, himself, wanted to be the child" (p.127). In other words, he is being careful because he does not want to be overthrown by a real baby from his position as forty-year old child. Or perhaps it is also that Yasha agrees with Schmul the musician that "when a man has children, he's not free anymore" (17). But there is also a hint of a more complex difficulty concerning procreation. After Emilia tells Yasha that she wants to bear his child (women are perpetually expressing this wish in Singer's fiction), he decides that he wants a son and "their mouths fused again. They consumed each other in a silent, bestial way" (p.122).

"Bestial" is, of course, what procreative sex is for Singer and for Yasha. In opposition to non-procreative sex, which is an act mediated by the nature-thwarting mind, procreative sex is completely under the control of unmodified, untamed nature. Pregnancy and childbirth are circumstances that cannot be mastered by the human will, by desire, or by imagination. There is no magic trick that can arrest the transformation of the woman's body, no high-wire act that can dispel her self-absorption during pregnancy, and no magic wand that can gain entrance to the biological/mythical realm of

mother and baby from which the father is so woefully excluded. And there are no words that can stop the river of blood (a reminder of the dreaded slaughterhouse, whose horrors this moment both reverses and reaffirms) in which the baby is transported out. This is all too strong a reminder of the forces magicians (and writers) have made it their purpose to subdue, too stark an intimation of the superiority of God and nature, of procreation over man's creations.

Yasha praises God and nature as a better magician than himself, but only when he is looking at just one aspect of nature: "'Oh, God Almighty, You are the magician, not I!'" Yasha whispered. 'To bring out plants, flowers and colors from a bit of black soil'" (p.73). But he decries God's and nature's bringing of plagues and famine and notices the destructive work of nature in shopwomen who had been married at fifteen, and had become grandmothers in their thirties, "old age, prematurely invited, had puckered their faces, stolen their teeth" (p.23).

Aging tugs at the magician's heart and mind, as indicated by the fact that he seeks to deny its unavoidability by associating it with the verb "to invite"; the adverb "prematurely" acknowledges inevitability, but also gives human will the power to delay and circumvent age. And indeed, in opposition to the shopwomen, Yasha's wife Esther has "a youthful face," and since she was childless, "she associated with the girls rather than with other married women" (p.12).

The author/magician has granted Yasha a wife who is made to elude, very much against her will, the snares of nature. The childlessness that she regrets so grievously is the very thing that keeps her young, and with the young, to the satisfaction of both writer and magician. She ages rapidly only after the also aging Yasha imprisons himself. In the case of Emilia, who is in her middle thirties, her youthful looks are of Yasha's own making. While she is certain of his love, and while their relationship still holds the promise of marriage, Emilia also looks younger than she is. But after she asks him to go away and never return (p.222), "He detected wrinkles in her forehead and white in her hair. As if this were a fairy tale, she had cast off some spell which had kept her eternally young" (p.223).

Yasha is under a similar spell, cast by the author, which he wants to hold on to, but cannot. Yasha is forty and looks ten years younger, but he seems to feel very much his age, and seethes with anger at the outrage. His indignation is directed at Emilia and Halina, the two women who would contain him in a social and biological circle of domesticity and reproduction, and he bristles at their reclining on soft cushions while he would be risking his life to keep them comfortable (p.117). They are the spiders who would keep themselves and the species going by sucking out his (already) ebbing life. For Yasha had never "ceased to suffer regret, shame, and the fear of death. He spent agonized nights

reckoning his years. How much longer would he remain young? Catastrophically, old age hovered about him" (p.118), while Yasha aims to be the one doing the hovering, aloft, on the tightrope that is both the means and symbol of his profession, and the perfect trope for what he is and wants.

The tightrope is a straight line between Yasha's (and human) aspiration and achievement, which stretches precariously over the treacherous abyss of nature. It is his linear, illusion-fueled, goal-directed thinking made concrete. It is also, at times, his taut superego extended daringly over the engulfing, miasmatic id which beckons and pulls from below. It is his sexual hardness straining from the body and seeking to transcend it. It is Yasha at his most competent, aggressively seeking to control the flesh by exercising it and striving to vanquish disquieting and turbulent nature with the magic wand of spirit and imagination.

The tightrope is also an expression of Yasha's frailties and flaws. Yasha, like most idealists, is an extremist. If he cannot walk over the great cities of the world, he will imprison the body which could not live up to the specifications of the mind. And if he cannot have all the women he wants, then he will have none. Anything in between is a compromise, is sheer impotence. The tightrope depends on the strict maintenance of extremes: the two knots at the ends have to be rigidly secured to insure that the middle, the space between the extremes, is as tight as possible, also an

absolute. Slackness, flexibility, and suppleness could spell disaster. The middle, though made extremist by the ends, is still fraught with danger. Only when at one end or the other is one safe. In addition, height is of the essence; in fact, the higher the better. This, of course, increases the extremism and danger of the act and makes it a matter of life and death.

The possibility of dying from a fall increases with age, and Yasha knows that he is compounding the problem by conducting his entire life as a tightrope act. He answers his wife's questions concerning other women in his life, by saying: "Those who run around with women don't walk tightropes. They find it hard enough to creep around on the ground. You know that as well as I do" (p.13). Yasha obliquely admits that walking the wire is a sublimation of the sexual, and that he knows the danger that he is incurring by the double life that he leads. But it goes further than this. Yasha recognizes that walking the tightrope is not just his livelihood, but also his character and his life, the way he chooses to go from day to day: "Funny, but he, Yasha, lived his whole life as if walking the tightrope, merely inches from disaster. One false move on his part, and Bolek would surely plunge a knife into his heart" (p.46). It is as though he found it intolerable to live without tension. He is a tightrope.

Tension is necessary for Yasha personally and professionally, and so is the exhilaration of opening locks. In the theater, opening locks and walking the high wire, he could have all the excitement and danger he needs. But he never performs in the novel, and as Irving S. Saposnik says, the novel contains only "implied magic."¹⁴ It depicts Yasha thinking about his work and ruminating on the increased danger of the tightrope for a man his age. Yasha has added to his peril by announcing he will turn a somersault on the tightrope, but he never rehearses this trick and never performs it. This additional danger represents the way he is leading his personal life as well, constantly adding to his burdens, but the novel stops short of putting him to the test. Instead, it places him on a metaphorical tightrope as Yasha replaces the real wire with a string of love affairs. As for locks, when it comes to a real robbery, Yasha is impotent in the face of a simple one. Yasha is shown opening only one lock, in Piask, the town of thieves.

At Zeftel's house, of which Yasha asks rhetorically: "Is this a theater?" (p.71), the only theatrical performance in the novel takes place (though, in a sense all his behavior is performance, or performance anxiety). As soon as Yasha and Zeftel finish making love, the curtains are drawn, and the audience begins to dribble in. First come the women who, to

¹⁴Irving S. Saposnik, "Yasha Mazur and Harry Houdini: The Old Magic and the New," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 55.

keep up the tradition of female response to glamorous male entertainers, are dressed up and flirtatious, even though "it was the general opinion on the hill that it was better to be the wife of a thief than of someone like Yasha" (p.62). The men come later, and it is clear to everybody that the central performance will involve the paper-wrapped package that Blind Mechl is carrying.

This theater, whose curtains have recently concealed (and revealed) the adulterous sex between Yasha and Zefitel, vibrates with vicarious, displaced eroticism. The respectably married women flirt, blush, and exchange meaningful looks. One of them, Malka, whose husband is in prison, blindfolds Yasha with her apron. She undoes this item and stands behind Yasha, covering his eyes and tickling him behind the ear. In the group, there are several former sweethearts of Yasha's who "looked at him coquettishly, grinning reminiscently" (p.65). Most importantly, these are the people who have witnessed Yasha's ascent from a bear-trainer's assistant to a star in the Polish theater. Here Yasha can enjoy the sexual gratification of having his life seen as an uninterrupted and still ongoing rise. They bestow the highest status upon him: "They all admired him as a master" (p.65). In other words, they give him a prominent place in the profession, put him at the peak of it. But these people provide Yasha with an even higher thrill, for "Yasha knew he was idolized by all here, men and women. He was the shining beacon of the citizens of

Piask" (p.71). This goes beyond mere recognition of talents, and Yasha seems to relish his admirers' self-subordination, their desire to regard him with blind adoration. He seems to thrive on the increased verticality they are ready to assign him. He has become the subject of a sort of cult, the guiding light of the entire town.

Yasha doles out cigars and cigarettes, gifts which consolidate his status as the one with something to offer, and also phallic symbols. He makes the thieves partake of the rectitude and upstandingness they themselves create with their "fallen" state (Yasha still believes in the Eighth Commandment the men violate for a living) and maintain with their fawning obeisance. After this, Yasha is ready to fulfill his shining-beacon functions by regaling his audience's ear. The citizens of Piask are interested in current events and Yasha, who "read all the Warsaw newspaper as well as the Israelita" (p.65), acquaints them with what is going on in he world. "Yasha explained everything" (p.65) while the thieves listened, "scratching their heads," and their flushed-faced women "traded glances" (p.66).

The central act of the performance is for the eye. Blind Mechl brings out his package and begins to unwrap "the paper slowly, revealing a huge lock, complete with clamps and appendages " (p.67). In response to this strip-tease, "Yasha instantly grew lighthearted. . . . He hissed, wriggled his nose, even artfully waggled his ears" (p67). Yasha's ears have

motility and the appendage of his nose turns in snake-like motion, while Yasha sharpens his utterances to warn his audience about his transmogrification. He is now a figure of phallic overstatement, prepared to pierce a lock that "God, Himself, couldn't open" (p.67).

What God finds difficult, Yasha will do blindfolded. And, indeed, though he knows that it is possible to see through the space between the eye and the bridge of the nose, he does not need his eyes because he is certain of his aim. He proceeds blindly, but shows the audience the skeleton key he will use for the job: "a thick piece of wire with a sharp point" (p.68). It is a double- purposed tool; it will open the lock, and it arouses the voyeurism of his audience. Yasha manually explores the lock, finds the keyhole and inserts the point of the wire. "Once within, he worked the wire so that it kept penetrating deeper, reaching to the locks entrails. For a while he probed and burrowed. He marveled at his own competence. That piece of wire revealed all the secrets, all the wiles that the Lublin experts had incorporated into the lock" (p.68).

The language here is unmistakably sexual, yet the act is also a competition with other men and with God. When Yasha succeeds, he rejoices at his own competence, not only because it consolidates his high position among the thieves but also because the piece of wire allowed him to appropriate the "secrets" and "wiles" of the Lublin experts. Yasha is truly

interested in learning, in probing and in finding out, and he is equally interested in preserving his prominent position among men. From this relative height, he proposes to continue probing for God's and nature's secrets, perhaps through his obsessive incursions into women's bodies. "A lock is like a woman," he says, "Sooner or later it must surrender. . . . You only need to squeeze the bellybutton" (p.69).

The coarse language heralds the shoddy denouement of this lackluster drama. When the spectators reach their peak of ambivalent anticipation, Yasha springs the lock open, and asks to have the blindfold removed: "with trembling fingers Malka untied the apron. The lock lay on the table as if impotent and disgraced" (69). Everybody is impressed with the feat, but "Yasha felt ashamed, sitting amongst this unsavory band" (p.70). He thinks about Emilia, who considers him a genius, an exalted artist. It is no mere post-coital depression. Yasha is spent, but he is also, like the lock, impotent and disgraced. He doesn't have the power to prevent himself from catering to these lowlifes who present him with no challenge worthy of his abilities or his aspirations. For the cracking of the lock has been extremely easy; "complex as it seemed, [the lock] was as childishly simple as the riddles schoolboys ask each other in cheder" (p.68). Yasha delayed the opening of it in order not to shame Blind Mechl and disappoint the others. Yasha is ashamed of a reputation built on such a foundation.

However, Yasha is a manic depressive. His character fluctuates according to the extremes of phallic highs and lows. Consequently, a plunge into depression can only be followed by a leap into grandiosity. Yasha concludes that "everyone was like a lock, each with his own key. Only one such as he, Yasha, could unlock all souls" (p.70). Yasha is temporarily distraught and disoriented, but he promptly regains the rails on his God-competing career track.

Yasha competes with the Jewish God by employing the skills of another God whom Yasha very much resembles. Yasha is uncannily like the Greek God of his trade, Hermes. As a patron of magic (and science), Hermes is like Yasha: nimble, subtle, cunning, inventive, deft. As he progresses in history and becomes Mercury in Rome, Hermes is also changeable, quick, elusive, difficult to get hold of, like the metal itself, like quicksilver.

Yasha is very aware of his mercurial nature: "he was a maze of personalities--religious and heretical, good and evil, false and sincere" (p.70). Morris Golden says that "Yasha Mazur plays a variety of roles and is responsive to a great variety of other people, constituting the Jew as Everyman."¹⁵ He is both protector and betrayer of all the women in his life. Elzbieta, Magda's mother, considers him their greatest

¹⁵Morris Golden, "Dr. Fischelson's Miracle: Duality and Vision in Singer's Fiction," The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) p. 31.

benefactor (though Magda does act as Yasha's assistant as well as his maid and mistress) because he behaves very generously toward the entire family. His kindness goes beyond the financial and material, and he "would draw Elzbieta out, encourage her to express herself, treat her as a mother-in-law should be treated, not as a hated mother-in-law, but as one beloved" (p.41). But he eventually drives her daughter to suicide. Religiously, "he was half Jew, half gentile--neither Jew nor Gentile" (p.11), and generally behaves like an atheist or a pagan. Even physically, he seems to be several different creatures. "His eyes were those of a cat; he could see in the dark" (p.15), and he turns "somersaults like a monkey" (p.9). Also like a monkey, "his toes were almost as long and tensile as his fingers." And "he could flex his body in any direction" (p.9), just as he can his affections.

In one of his love affairs, Yasha exhibits an additional similarity with Hermes/Mercury. Hermes is also the God of theft, and Yasha, honorary monarch of the thieves of Piask, is ready to try his hand at stealing, so that he can have the hand of the aristocratic Emilia in marriage. "Emilia appeals to Yasha's desire for more freedom, more variety, more secularity."¹⁶ Yasha finds himself having to attempt burglary after he amazes himself by saying to her: "I've come to you now and we won't be separated again" (p.97). He makes the

¹⁶Irving H. Buchen, Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past (New York: New York University Press, 1968) p. 106.

arrangement official when he tells Halina that he and her mother will be married soon, and that the three of them will be going to Italy (p.108). He doesn't tell them that they can only go with the money he plans to steal from the miser Zaruski.

The enterprise is carried out, like everything in Yasha's life, with a rise-and-fall rhythm. The plunge into thievery, which he takes in order to be able to "climb" to Emilia's social level, requires him to scale a balcony which isn't hers, for, as he realizes, "The Age of Knighthood was long since past. This was the prosaic nineteenth century" (p.160), and what is needed is money, not romance. Zaruski's balcony "rested on the heads of three statues," and Yasha swings upwards easily by taking "hold of the knee of a goddess" (p.161). On his way down "he wished to support [his feet] upon he shoulders of another statue but they fell short of the goal" (p.169), and Yasha jumps and hurts his left foot. A goddess helps him on the way up but another thwarts him on the way down. Moreover, up smells and feels very much like down; while in the miser's apartment, Yasha "can smell the rot and mildew" (p.161), and he has to do a great deal of kneeling, stooping, and dragging himself over the floor in search of his dropped skeleton key. Most importantly, during the time Yasha spends in the godlike heights (as sordid an Olympus as can be imagined), he experiences the plummeting of all his abilities.

Yasha doesn't know how he lost the skeleton key he needs for opening the miser's safe. He reaches into his pocket, and his hand comes out empty, not once, but repeatedly. At the threshold of desperation, he considers and rejects the possibility of using the metal tip of one of his shoelaces, unsuccessfully tries a pair of scissors found on the premises, and finally decides to make a stiff paper cone which also proves useless. Yasha then knows that he is under the power of an internal enemy, "an implacable adversary who would disconcert him while he was juggling, push him from the tightrope, make him impotent" (p.167). He proves himself right. Later, Yasha finds the skeleton key, but he is no longer the confident, crafty, and infallible penetrator of old: "he approached the safe on shaky legs, fitted the skeleton key into the keyhole, and began to probe. But his will, strength, and ambition had been spent" (p.169).

Forty may be old for tightrope walking, but it is young for sexual impotence. Yasha's feeling "spent," the pronounced decline of his motivation and dexterity is, to a considerable extent, reactive. It is true that Yasha enjoys thinking of his life as "a storybook in which the situation grows tenser and tenser until one can barely wait to turn the page" (p.137), but it is equally true that he is showing signs of fatigue as a response to a particular circumstance; he is beginning to feel exploited. Even Magda agrees that "everyone robbed him, swindled him, deceived him" (p.126). She and Esther work for

their living but Zeftel and Emilia require Yasha's financial support. Professionally, he is underpaid and under-appreciated and, as Lewis Fried points out, "he is categorized by his class and cast" instead of by his proficiency.¹⁷ Yasha is reacting against all of this: "I won't let myself be trapped. Tomorrow, I'll run away. I'll leave everything behind--Emilia, Wolsky, the Alhambra, the magic, Magda. I've been a magician long enough. I've walked the tightrope too often!" (p.116). Yasha muses that if he were to fall and smash his body, Emilia and Halina "would put him out on the threshold to beg and not one of his admirers would stoop to fling a groshen into his hat" (p.117). It is no wonder, then, that he loses the key and comically (particularly if one insists on responding to the plainly sexual terminology) seeks to replace it with such revealingly inadequate objects as a plastic shoelace tip and a "stiff" paper cone. Yasha loses the key because, paradoxically, he wants out. He is done with his peripatetic life and profession. The winged footed Hermes/Mercury figure is no more. He has metamorphosed into a limping middle-age man looking for shelter.

In search of what he needs, and as if to ascertain the accuracy of his intuitions regarding Emilia, and also the solidity of his own plans, Yasha goes to see her. Under pressure from her to make definite plans, Yasha "realized

¹⁷Lewis Fried, "The Magician of Lublin: I. B. Singer's Ironic Man of Faith" Yiddish 2.1 (Fall 1975): 62.

suddenly that he could put things off no longer. The words that he had to say must be uttered this very instant. But he had not yet determined what to say or how to act" (p.21). He is still waiting to see what type of performance the moment calls for. He confesses that he has no money. However, when Emilia reacts negatively to this, he panics and hastens to promise that he will raise the needed sum (p.212). He is still ready to steal. It is only after Emilia has talked to the detective that Yasha "shocked himself at the words he uttered" (p.219) and told Emilia the truth. His words have a spirit of their own (the same spirit that made the key disappear) which blows as it pleases. This time it blows him down into the gutter, for his words result in his being irrevocably flung out of Emilia's life.

Emilia's firm dismissal consolidates Yasha's katabasis. His fall, which begins with his moral descent into attempted thievery, gains momentum, turns precipitous, and cannot be stalled. The magician's life becomes an uncontrollable succession of horrors and disappointments.

The first of these horrors is Magda's death, about which Yasha has a vague foreknowledge, a sort of premonition. When silence meets him at their apartment, where he goes after the bungled robbery and before visiting Emilia, he wonders if Magda has killed herself (p.187). Inside, he cannot stand the sight of a chicken's broken, bloody neck and "for some inexplicable reason he righted the chicken and covered its

torn neck with a beet" (p.200). These two instances of apprehension apparently make Yasha feel that he could have, perhaps, prevented Magda's suicide, if only he had realized that he was actually intuiting its imminence, and cause him to yearn for punishment. Yasha's desire to be held accountable for his transgressions is the counterpart of his uncontrollable libertinage and has long been gestating in him. On one occasion he answers a waiter's question with the words "to pay" and muses that "his words seemed ambiguous--as if he had intended saying: to pay for my deceitful life" (p.114). After Magda's death, this desire to pay is intensified and he consciously wishes to be taken to prison (p.238) as punishment for her death. Yasha cannot be blamed for Magda's suicide but he is apparently indicting himself for disregarding the hints of his own adumbrating mind.

Indeed, suicide by hanging is a repeated motif in this novel. Yasha conducts his life as a tightrope act but we never see him on a literal tightrope. The tightrope is more an emblem than a tangible reality in this novel and the actual ropes in it are nooses. Zefitel tells Yasha that she has considered suicide "'Just because I was tired and there was a rope nearby. I saw a hook on a beam. This very hook by the lamp. I climbed up on the footstool and it fit to a hair. Then I began to laugh'" (p.59). What Zefitel considered, Magda carried out, and when Yasha found his assistant hanging from the ceiling, he couldn't even cut the rope himself. A neighbor

had to loosen the knot and take the uncut rope off by "passing it over [Magda's] head" (p.237. At this point the palpable rope of suicide also becomes emblematic; it is transformed into Yasha's figurative yoke: "he had burdened himself with too heavy a yoke even before Emilia" (p.117). The rope that kills Magda unties Yasha from his profession and his multiple love affairs.

The magician is undone by the reality of Magda's death. Guilt and intimations of his own demise fill him with trepidation. At this moment, Yasha conforms to Elsie Levitan's ideas of Singer's characters as "static victims of forces they cannot control."¹⁸ Yasha feels like "a frightened, guilty schoolboy, plagued by fears he could no divulge and by entanglements no stranger could understand" (p.241), and refrains from turning his head because "some shadowy form lurked, ready to leap upon him and attack him with tooth and claw--something monstrous and nameless" (pp.240-41).

In efforts to escape this monstrous and nameless" entity, trying to understand his predicament, and still looking for the refuge now also denied by Magda in ways even more categorical and final than Emilia's, Yasha takes another dive--this time into the self-mirroring squalor of a cheap tavern. He thinks about his own death and is sure that his foot is gangrenous, but if not, perhaps he should throw himself into

¹⁸Elsie Levitan, "The Cosmos of Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Critical View," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 146.

the Vistula because "it was time to see what lay on the other side of the curtain" (p.246). With death one goes backstage where one can examine the props that produce this semblance of a turmoil. Is Yasha still performing? He keeps on assuring himself that he is resolved to die but is worried about finding a place to spend the night. Later, when he is on his way to visit Zeftel, "he was more concerned about the impropriety of visiting Zeftel at this hour and about the shame of exposing his situation to her and her hosts, than with sorrow for Magda or the fear of losing his foot" (p.253). The surface of things, the act, continues to cause Yasha more disquiet than the substance. The possibility of public embarrassment is far more grievous than Magda's death and the loss of his foot. But it must have been preferable to death, for Yasha, who has reflected that "the best solution would be to leave the country. Maybe go to Argentina" (p.253), concludes that "even if Zeftel's hosts throw him out" (p.256), Zeftel will go with him because she loves him (p.257). Having been called "offal" by Emilia, and having thought in his misery that the powers that be "play with a man and then cast him aside as offal" (p.252), he now chooses as his last hope a woman he has always held in very low esteem. Predictably, he finds her in bed with Herman the pimp.

Upon seeing Zeftel and Herman in bed, "he felt sorrow, emptiness, a sense of powerlessness. It was not unlike the feeling he had experienced a few hours earlier when he had

discovered Magda dead" (p.257). Magda's life, love, suffering and death are cheapened, sullied by Yasha's emotional shallowness. He has fulfilled the desire, which he has when suspicious that Magda has spent the night out, "to seize her by the hair and drag her along the floor" (p.196). He has also paid her back for dying on him. He feels no sorrow for her, it is only for himself that he grieves. Yasha has reached bottom.

It is from this lowest point that he rises to the respectable prominence of his last persona, Reb Jacob the Penitent. Yasha's decision to become a penitent is not a sudden one. Yasha the magician makes it clear to Esther and to himself that he cannot repent like a mere mortal. Very early in the novel he asks her "what would happen if I became an ascetic and, to repent, had myself bricked into a cell without a door like that saint in Lithuania?" (p.32). When Esther argues that such extremes are not necessary, he counters that it depends on the passion one is trying to control. I maintain that Yasha exaggerates his lust to deny his ebbing abilities. In addition, being an ascetic and a saint are the extreme opposites of being a magician and a libertine, and this oscillation also assures him notoriety and prominence. The "arch magician and fabled fornicator"¹⁹ cannot obscure his past successes by repenting like a mere mortal. Indeed, as Jacob the Penitent, Yasha is so important that "the Rabbi

¹⁹Baruch Hochman, "I. B. Singer's Vision of Good and Evil," Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p. 129.

disputed with him as with an equal" (p.261), and Yasha manages to persuade him that his actions "are intended for the glory of heaven" (p.262), even though most pious Jews are opposed to Yasha's plans. Yasha's decision to have himself "bricked up" becomes the peak dramatic performance of his career. The audience is vast and diverse. People in Piask and Lublin place wagers on how long Yasha can endure his cell, and "even the governor had been kept informed" (p.262). When the walls are being built "so vast and tumultuous had the crowds become that the police had ridden on horseback and dispersed them" (p.163). Claiming to want anonymity and peace, Yasha attracts more people than at any other moment in the novel. As Maximilian E. Novak says: "he becomes a recluse, whose fame is achieved, ironically enough, by withdrawing from the world he wished to conquer by his will."²⁰ Enclosed, Yasha is more exposed and visible than ever because his action is just the reverse of libertinage rather than a developmental step away from it. Yasha has not grown, he has not changed, and he has not found the key to his own unconscious.

Perhaps all would be different if he had used the skeleton key successfully at Zaruski's. Yasha's failure to open the black, coffin-like safe is also a refusal to look into the dark depths of his unconscious and to put himself to

²⁰Maximilian E. Novak, "Moral Grotesque and Decorative Grotesque in Singer's Fiction," The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) p.54.

the real test. As it is, he is not an honest man but an incompetent thief. A glance into the blackness within could have also revealed to Yasha that he is the double of the miser Zaruski. Yasha's miserliness is his keeping his true affections under lock and key, "hermetically" closed. It is the way in which he denies all of his women the respect and loyalty he himself demands. He objectifies his women and juggles them around his body--as invigorators of his psychic and physical virility--while allowing no one entrance into his heart.

Unlocking the black safe of his mind and heart might have helped Yasha understand why "it was one of his attributes to adjust to any character" (p.54) and might have prompted him to ponder the reasons and possible consequences of such pliability. He might have even discovered within him the uncompromising rigidity which is the inextricable obverse of his chameleon-like nature. Since he did not look within himself, Yasha does not change. Continuing to take his cue from the highs and lows of his body, he merely swings from one extreme to another. Having failed to make his way into the secrets of his safe-like subconscious, he builds a subconscious-like safe into which he secretes himself, a prisoner of the subterranean forces of the psyche. By self-sequestration in cave-like darkness, cold, and dampness, he proposes to make the world "safe" from his predations and triumphs.

Yasha's brick cell is hyperbolic; the raging power it is designed to contain is more than half spent. The cell is a confirmation of Yasha's inextinguishable illusions: of his obstinate belief in the physical abilities whose decline he cannot really acknowledge and in the attainability of the outrageous dreams he cannot yet renounce. It concretizes his grandiosity. It is the place to imprison the body for its failure to live up to the requirements of the imagination, but it is mainly a denial of the failure. It asserts that the superhuman powers Yasha is certain of possessing are still intact and could easily be unleashed on the unsuspecting world if the walls were weaker or if there were a door. It is the monument to Yasha's tightrope-like extremism.

Inside the cell, Yasha is still walking his emblematic wire. This time it is a religious one. For him "the choice between licentiousness and asceticism is made absolute, as if the only escape from the one were to the other."²¹ True to his unchanged character, Yasha reflects that "there is no middle road. A single step from God, plunged one into the deepest abyss" (p.269). Yasha is still oscillating between the sky and an unfathomable chasm.

At times, the cell is the abyss. It is the place in which Yasha the magician continues to perform for a small but extremely select audience which consists solely of Satan, or

²¹Ruth R. Wisse, "Singer's Paradoxical Progress," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 157.

the "Evil Spirit." The devil, who "is man's shadow; he acquires substance only if granted access by the original,"²² desires Yasha to return to the world and has to be continuously circumvented. The two of them hold endless debates: "entire days and nights were consumed by such disputes, driving Yasha to the brink of madness" (p.269). But Yasha is temporarily dwelling with Satan in the abyss of a damp, dark, cold cell because he still aspires to the status of his competitor, God, in the pure, sparkly coolness of the sky. The tightrope has failed him, but Yasha has not given up on wings; he has not renounced his high aspirations.

Unsuccessful at attaining either God-likeness or God's company, Yasha the magician is the recipient of only a little less: rabbihood and sainthood. He believes that "if there is no God, man must behave like God" (p.268), and he finds himself in a situation in which people "spoke to Yasha the magician as if he were God" (p.273). Jews come to him "in audience" and this, according to the Lublin rabbi, makes Yasha a rabbi. But in addition to this, soon "there was talk in the city of the miracles performed by Yasha the Penitent" (p.271), and the women are quick to promote Yasha from Holy Rabbi to Holy Saint.

Yasha's new status as saint and as rabbi is also a social promotion. Among Jews, he has ascended from the depths of a

²²Irving H. Buchen, "The Devil and I. B. Singer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 24.

despised profession. Although he continues to be a sort of magician, he now practices the superior magic of Judaism. He is no longer denigrated by the people who used to feel sorry for Esther for having such a lowly husband, and his stunts are now called "miracles." In the gentile world, Yasha's exploits are still receiving press coverage and, as Emilia reports in her letter, "they speak of you once more in Warsaw, but this time only with admiration" (p.187). This admiration is well-deserved since Yasha has transformed the magic wand of the itinerant magician into the staff of the healer. Yasha's new emblem is Hermes\Mercury's winged rod wrapped by two serpents. Yasha finally achieves complete resemblance to a god, and he has obtained his wings.

However, these were not really the wings Yasha aspired to. Yasha literally wanted to fly over the great cities of Europe. He intended to hover, look down, and pick what he wanted. He wanted power, the highest position among men. The wings were to be his means for making real his fantasies about being emperor of the world. But Yasha also sought the buoyancy and self-sufficiency of actually being suspended in the elements. He wished to taste the sheer joy of needing nothing more than being able to drift aloft. He yearned to have real wings which would provide the thrill of defeating gravity. But most importantly, through overcoming gravity, he strove to acquire the weightlessness which is the only guarantee against falling.

Yasha's failure to obtain literal wings forces him to make the best of his figurative ones, and he interprets his self-incarceration as a sort of "flight" over the pressures and miseries of his previous life: "He was free of all needs. His food cost only a few groschen a day. He required neither clothing, nor wine, nor money" (p.265). In addition, Yasha is certain that inside his cell "he was protected from the graver transgressions": he is prevented from "falling" into sinfulness. But the brick cell is even better than this. Inside its damp darkness, Yasha feels "as if he had become again a foetus in his mother's womb" (p.265). A foetus in the mother's womb is a winged creature. It floats effortlessly in its sack of amniotic fluid, defying gravity in its relative weightlessness, and knowing no fear of falling. The foetus is a magician who has not had to give up a single illusion, who is not yet engaged in warfare with God and nature because it is still one with the universe.

Yasha's retreat into the womb is also a special incursion into the female space he seems to have intently researched and scrutinized through his multiple love affairs. This time, however, he is entering this space as a sort of sacred temple. If previously Esther was his synagogue, the destination of his holiday visits, now the cell is his Esther. It is the place he inhabits permanently (much to the real Esther's deprivation and sorrow). In this female realm, he is still aiming high by adhering to the Heaven-getting rules of orthodox Judaism. But

he is also here to attempt to grasp stasis. He proposes to stop the anarchy created by the excessive fluidity of personality and event which characterized his life as magician, and to attain tranquility, peace, immutability, and a sort of death.

Yasha does not succeed. The only insight into femaleness he attains in his little sacred enclosure is that femaleness is subject to penetration. The world he sought to run from intrudes upon him through the small aperture of the window. Crowds of supplicants come to seek his help everyday, and "he stood at his window from dawn until nightfall" (p.275). Religiously, he continues to be plagued by doubts, and his strident affirmations of God's existence and omnipotence betray his unvanquished faithlessness. Yasha's movements are limited within the confines of the cell and he has developed arthritis, an illness in which the pain that accompanies motion forces immobility, a sort of stasis, but outside his window and inside his head turmoil reigns. He strives to stick to his Reb Jacob composure and serenity, but the supplicants set him awash in the turbulence of their fears, desire and hatreds. Even worse, most of the people that come to seek his services make him lose what Dinah Pladott calls his "measure of dignity and stature" (p.67) because they are ignorant and superstitious. He is the prisoner of a loud, bitter, and contentious rabble.

However, Yasha's story oscillates again and ends on a high note. Emilia, the woman he regarded as his one possibility of salvation, writes him a letter of love and validation. Yasha failed to work out a life with her, but they are each other's best memory. In her fantasies, Emilia had granted him success in America and visualized him surrounded by luxury and beautiful women. She confesses that the time with him was the happiest in her life and blames herself for having enticed him to sin. And though she thinks that Yasha is inflicting too severe a punishment upon himself, she cries tears of joy at the thought of Yasha turned holy man.

In a way, Yasha is a great deal more than a holy man, just as he always was considerably more than a simple magician. He is a penitent whose belief in the power of his own imagination is firmer than the faith in God he is making such great efforts to develop. This makes him irresistibly human. Cyrena Pondrom points out that "faith does not change in the novel, action does."²³ Yasha cannot rid himself of the religious doubts that make him a sort of secular figure at the beginning, nor can he silence his unimpaired imagination. Inside his brick prison he is still fantasizing, among other things, that Emilia "had purchased an estate in Lublin and had a tunnel dug from her bedroom directly to his cell" (p.280).

²³Cyrena Pondrom "Conjuring Reality: I. B. Singer's The Magician of Lublin" The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) p. 96.

Furthermore, the very excess of Yasha's punishment, concretized in the brick enclosure, is a statement of religious doubt and of imaginative assertion. However, when Yasha likens this self-made prison to the womb, he comes as close as he can to believing in God. But because he does so in an extremely imaginative (personal) manner, his act of faith is simultaneously one of denial. For the fleeting moment that Yasha thought of his cell as a womb, and of himself as a baby in it, he was engaged in his fiercest moment of competition with God. He was both the architect of the womb and the father/mother of the baby. The greatest of all magicians, he was self-conceiving and self-gestating; he was father, mother, and progeny. He was omnipotent and self-begetting, just like God. Yasha scorns even to go the way of the Messiah (Jesus or the one still expected) and disdains to be content with the status of God's son. He simply has to be his own maker, his own author--just like Isaac Bashevis Singer!

Singer, more than many other authors of the twentieth century, had to invent himself and had to live with the consequences of such an awesome accomplishment. Self-creation is treacherous stuff: it makes a man proud; it leads inevitably to a certain amount of arrogance and of fear. The ultimate in family romance is coeval with the ultimate in castration anxiety because being self-creating arouses the fear that one will also have to be self-castrating. Thus the need to atone, to propitiate. Isaac, like Yasha, retains to

the end a clamorous, exhibitionistic, deeply desired wish for firm religious belief, along with the hubris of those who manage to climb way above the depths of their own origins. But Isaac did his propitiating and his atoning vicariously. He preserved and protected his freedom to transgress by confining and punishing his protagonists. Yasha's imprisonment seems unfair because it is. But it is Isaac's way of keeping himself imaginatively and creatively (perhaps also sexually) free.

Singer's vicarious chastisement reaches its peak in The Penitent (1983) and Scum (1991), which are impoverished variations on the Yasha theme. These are novels in which Singer "tends to yield the quality of sympathy to the temptation of clever disparagement."²⁴ When Joseph Shapiro, the protagonist of The Penitent, discovers that others are similar to him in appetites and needs, he gives up modern life and, totally without belief, moves to Meah Shearim, the orthodox section of Jerusalem, where he imprisons himself in the garb and ritual of orthodox Judaism and attempts to become saintly. Instead he is full of contempt for everyone and seethes with anger and unacknowledged resentment. He impresses the reader very negatively because, as Leonard Prager says, "no one who loathes so large a part of humanity and its way as

²⁴Charles A. Madison, Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) p.489.

he does can be regarded as saintly."²⁵ In Scum, Max Barabander, a Warsaw thief who became a respectable and wealthy man in Buenos Aires, returns to Poland, deceives five different women--including a rabbi's daughter--with whom he gets involved, and ends up in jail after shooting one of them. The misanthropic nature of this novel is announced by its epigraph from the story "The Death of Methuselah," which concludes that man can only crawl over the surface of the earth because "flesh and corruption were the same from the very beginning and always will remain the scum of creation."²⁶ The grandiosity of the airy realm of unbridled fantasy and aspiration is brought here to its logical extreme. Man is no magician; on the contrary, he is just a disgusting film on the surface of a stagnant pool. The protagonist deserves to be in jail because it is the only way he can be prevented from evil-doing. These two novels, which mark Singer's precipitous fall from his artistic heights of subtlety and ambiguity to the doubtful pleasures of self-flagellation, "lack the peculiar strength of his earlier work."²⁷ They offer no room for questioning and doubt, for

²⁵Leonard Prager, "Ironic Couplings" in Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) p. 74.

²⁶Isaac Bashevis Singer. "The Death of Methuselah" in The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories (New York: New American Library, 1989) p.244.

²⁷Daniel Walden, "I. B. Singer, The Vintage Years," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 136.

simply being human, since man can only swing between being a criminal or a self-shackled saint.

But these novels do give one an idea of the extent of Singer's guilt. He took the Yiddish language all the way to Stockholm, gaining for himself and his people an honor which will endure as long as civilization does, but he betrayed his parents' aspirations. Moreover, he knows that his art is both defiance and pleasure and that it assists and reflects his tendency to indulge in the delights of the flesh. He had to escalate the vicarious confessions and punishment as his reputation and fame increased, and this escalation culminated in Scum. Yasha was too glamorous. Shapiro was a respectable man and his action, though obviously a matter of cutting one's nose to spite oneself, takes place in the Holy Land. But Max Barabander is simply a thief (like Singer and Yasha) and ends up in jail. This is more like it. Jail is what Singer felt he really deserved because of the immensity of his sin. As Ted Hughes says, Singer's "creative demon . . . is the voice of his nature, which requires at all cost satisfaction in life, full inheritance of its natural joys . . . it is what in most men stares dumbly through the bars."²⁸ In Scum, this creative demon is finally placed where Singer believed it belongs! Of course, this punishment also makes it clear that Singer is and will always be of the devil's party, a

²⁸Ted Hughes, "The Genius of Isaac Bashevis Singer," New York Review of Books, April 22, 1965, p.8.

transgressor. He is adamantly refusing to modify his stance and settles for self-administering the penalty vicariously through these works.

Mercifully, these novels, which are full of self-loathing and of contempt for all of humanity, give away the game by deconstructing themselves; they are simply poor pieces of work. Unworthy of the author, devoid of the qualities that made him great, they may be good personal purgation but they are not good art. They are the flip side of extremely high ambition, the fall from Yasha's tightrope.

They are very different from The Magician of Lublin, which flickers with so many different meanings. For example, though this novel's ending is disappointing, Yasha's self-incarceration could be construed as merely a momentary fall. Singer said: "The Magician of Lublin could be called a morality tale. In this book I had more of an 'axe to grind.'"²⁹ Singer does not make a very good moralist. Perhaps that is due to his ambiguity which, as Michael Fixler says, "is artistically suggestive but morally questionable."³⁰ In this novel, the walk on the tightrope continues in the reader's imagination because it has not been

²⁹Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer" in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.24.

³⁰Michael Fixler, "Themes in the Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer" in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.73.

given up by Yasha or by the author. That tantalizing letter from Emilia promises that Halina will also write "a long letter." What if she were to call him out of that cell? Yasha's pattern of behavior warrants a certain belief in his ability to react to each period of confinement and flaccidity with a burst of renewed energy and confidence. As long as his imagination is still bursting with grandiose ideas, there is still the possibility that there will be "an unavoidable recurrence of the Promethean urge"³¹ and that he will again embark in God-competing activities as he pursues the "distortion" of reality his restless mind so much desires.

³¹Irving Howe, "I. B. Singer" in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.119.

CHAPTER VI
ENEMIES: A LOVE STORY

Enemies¹ is Singer's most distinguished and distinctive book. Whereas his other novels begin with openness and end with enclosure--Asa Heshel in Hitler-threatened Warsaw, Yasha Mazur imprisoned in his own walls, Joseph Shapiro in religious strictures for which he is temperamentally unsuited, Max Barabander in jail--this one does the opposite. It begins with the reenactment of hiding in the isolation of a hayloft, and ends with the possibility of the hero's sallying forth into North America's legendary open spaces. However, this is still also a novel of enclosure because it is dominated by external and internal tyrannies. The protagonist Herman Broder's life can only be carried out by hiding, and the search for love has to be conducted within the horrifying confines of a world defined and pervaded by Hitler. Although Enemies is a characteristically Singerian product in its superb depiction of love and sexuality, Herman Broder is more a fugitive than a pursuer of women and of life. Herman is one of the heroes who become "representative of all men in their insistent

¹Isaac Bashevis Singer, Enemies, A Love Story (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

attempt to reconcile the contradictory yearnings and needs of the individual."² He wants love on terms he cannot get his women to grant. Through Herman's attempts to realize his desires, this novel squarely confronts the immense difficulties of attaining love under the conditions of natural and social enmity which sever male and female.

The shadow of Hitler hangs heavily over this entire novel, and the most important image in it is the hayloft in which Herman Broder has to hide from the Nazis under the protection of the Polish peasant, Yadviga. Having caught the habit of hiding early in life, Herman conducts his life as a continuous peregrination from one hayloft to another. When we first meet him in New York City, Herman has not been able to forget his war ordeal in Yadviga's hayloft and still has nightmares about Nazi soldiers "trying to flush him out, while he pressed deeper and deeper into the hay. The blade of a bayonet touched his head" (p.3). And indeed, Herman's mind has been deeply affected by the "touch" of Hitler's destructive prominence. Herman, instead of simply evincing dread at the horrible memories of that time, actually spins fantasies about the Germans occupying New York City; "the Nazis function in his mind on a purely whimsical level."³ He exercises his mind

²Dinah Pladott, "Casanova or Schlemiel? The Don Juan Archetype in I. B. Singer's Fiction," Yiddish 6. 2-3 (Summer/Fall, 1985): 62.

³David Seed, "The Community in I. B. Singer's Fiction," Yiddish 4. 2 (1980): 17.

by trying to figure out how Yadviga will manage to feed him this time around, how windows can be camouflaged and doors walled up and painted; and, as he walks around the city, "his eye sought hiding places in case the Nazis were to come to New York" (p.17). Herman recognizes that "these daydreams had taken on the character of an obsession" (p.10), but he cannot help it. For him, the enemy, some type of enemy, seems to be out there eternally trying to "flush him out" and he has no choice but to press "deeper and deeper" into the hay. But in New York, the hay under which Herman attempts to hide is a complete network of untruth he has woven.

As Marilyn Chandler has noted, "Herman is a man who lives by words: he interprets Talmud, writes sermons and books, edits manuscripts, reads incessantly, and writes compulsively."⁴ But Herman uses language unwisely: Herman lies for a living and for a life. He ghost-writes sermons and articles for the worldly Rabbi Lampert. He colludes in the Rabbi's dishonesty in order to support himself and Yadviga. He uses his profound knowledge of Judaism to do this work, but he no longer practices the religion he extols in his writings. In addition, he conceals from the rabbi his marital status and his address and has to constantly deflect the rabbi's attempt to get closer to him. Herman lies to Yadviga about his job and about his mistress Masha, and he also lies to Masha. Since

⁴Marilyn R. Chandler, "Death by the Word: Victims of Language in Enemies, A Love Story," Studies in American Jewish Literature 7 (Spring, 1988): 105.

Masha knows that he is married, Herman, apparently incapable of tolerating the possibilities for truthfulness in this situation, feels compelled to tell Masha that Yadviga is frigid and that he will marry Masha as soon as she can get a divorce from her husband.

Ostensibly Herman's lying has only the purpose of concealing himself from a hostile outside world. At second glance, however, it seems that it is also a means of isolating himself from everybody, including those closest to him. Herman's greatest (unacknowledged) impulse, the clearest direction of his life, seems to be toward being alone. Living with Yadviga he has attained a sort of aloneness, for "when he talked to her, it was as if he were alone" (p.23). It is to insure equal aloneness in New York City that he builds the hayloft of mendaciousness under which to keep himself apart from others. It is as though Herman feels as imperiled in peacetime America as he was in Hitler's Europe.

But though Herman wants to hide and to be alone in his world of lies, he also wants to be "caught." The figurative hayloft of falsehood he has constructed for his existence in the new world is as confining as the original one but does not promise the same security. On the contrary, in addition to the fact that his entanglement in lies can only lead to self-disgust and alienation, Herman will inevitably be found out. No Yadviga can save him from the consequences of his own actions. He was safer when the enemy was Hitler, an external

tyrant, than he is now, under the control of the dictator within. Moreover, although Hitler is omnipresent in this fiction, Herman's vocation for escape and isolation predates the war.

Herman Broder believes that "from microbe to man, life prevail[s] from generation to generation by sneaking past the jealous powers of destruction" (p.247). He sees the history of his people as an example of this and claims that the "Bible, the Talmud, and the Commentaries instruct the Jew in one strategy: flee from evil, hide from danger, avoid showdowns, give the angry powers of the universe as wide a berth as possible" (p.247). Herman practices what he preaches (which is identical to what Singer himself believes: "God Himself, the Lord has created the world so; . . . all I can do in such a world is not really live but smuggle myself through life"⁵) and his life is an ongoing act of stealth. Though basically an unbeliever, Herman adheres to stealth as a religious principle and he does so way before Hitler makes it a survival need.

In Poland before the war, Herman's tendency to flee and to conceal himself was connected with his desire to protect himself against married life. He runs from his wife Tamara and their two children. He cannot stay by her side even though he admits to himself that Tamara is an excellent wife who, even after he had moved out of their house and lived in a furnished

⁵Richard Burgin with Isaac Bashevis Singer, Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1985) p. 176.

room, "would come and clean it for him and bring him food. She nursed him when he was sick, mended his clothes, and washed his linen. She even typed his dissertation, although in her opinion it was antihumanistic, anti-feminist, and depressing in outlook" (p.64).

Indeed, the dissertation is an expression of Herman's most outstanding characteristics and beliefs. Herman is a disciple of Schopenhauer,⁶ determined "never to marry and bring new generations into the world" (p.30). In addition, he agrees with Otto Weininger that a female is a creature with "no sense of logic, no memory, amoral, nothing but a vessel of sex" (p.30). In other words, Herman, although having a love affair with Tamara, wants to evade his duty to nature; he wants no part in the bloody biological cycle of perpetuating the species. This necessitates a view of the nature-bound female as the enemy, a diabolical organism whose only function is sexual: to entrap the male into impregnating her so that she can rejoice in the fulfillment of her biological destiny. She is amoral and ruthless in her purposes, and the guile she

⁶Evelyn Torton Beck, "The Many Faces of Eve: Women, Yiddish, and Isaac Bashevis Singer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1. (1981). Beck believes that Singer's frequent use of Schopenhauer in his work leads to the conclusion that he shares the philosopher's misogynism (pp.116-17). I believe that this is true to a certain extent. Singer is a misogynist by training and indoctrination but, like his heroes, he places great hopes in male-female relationships, and the submerged message in his work is one of love and admiration for females. Thus the glitter, glamour and attractiveness of most of the female characters in the long fiction.

employs for her success has to be denied, has to be reversed into (Weininger's) lack of logic and of memory, for woman is awesome enough even after having been robbed of her intellectual attributes by the reality-eluding male.

Tamara proves Herman right in all of his fears. Even though he has shared his views with her, "she became pregnant, refused to have an abortion, and enlisted her family to force him into marriage" (p.30). She proved more interested in her natural functions and social status than in developing a relationship of commonality with him. Rather than allowing him the opportunity to attempt an accommodation with the demands of nature and the strictures of society with her help and support, she betrayed him by handing him over to the forces he is most afraid of. When he moves out of their house, he is not, strictly speaking, engaging in an act of volition but, rather, he is enacting his virtual exile, which is reaffirmed after her second pregnancy. Physically, he has been exiled from Tamara by the children he did not desire. Intellectually and spiritually, he has been outcast by her complete imperviousness to his beliefs and aspirations. In her hierarchy of values, Herman occupies a very low position and he has to run away from her and the children, he has to accept exile in order to regain his bearings. His furnished room is the first place in which he obeys the Jewish injunction to "hide from danger."

Danger is not too strong a term to apply to the situation with Tamara.⁷ Herman gives her full recognition for her qualities and is even willing to believe that "she was essentially a spiritual person" (p.63). However, when he finds out that she is still alive he thinks of her as a "hysterical woman, who had tormented him and whom he was about to divorce before the war broke out" (p.62). The odium conveyed by "hysterical" and "tormented" seems to derive from the fact that Tamara, though not very amenable to individual persuasion (at least not by Herman) is frighteningly manipulable socially. Tamara "attended the lectures of all the party demagogues. When she was a Communist, she wore a leather jacket a la Cheka; when she became a Zionist, she wore the star of David around a neck" (p.64). She impulsively and passionately follows fads. Herman hits on the dangerousness of such a condition when he muses that she seems to be "the incarnation of the masses, always following some leader, hypnotized by slogans never really having an opinion of her

⁷ Most critics admire Tamara. Dorothy Bilik, "Singer's Diasporan Novel: Enemies, a Love Story," Studies in American Jewish Literature, 1.2 (1981-82):93, calls her "a saintly sufferer." Sarah Blacher Cohen "From Hens to Roosters," Recovering the Canon ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) says that "Tamara is a magnanimous version of the biblical Sarah" (p.80). I believe that Tamara's goodness was more a matter of social conditioning than of enlightened choice, think that Herman was right in running away from it, and suspect that Singer himself would have run even faster.

own" (p.64).⁸ Tamara could be the base of support for any tyrant, for anyone willing to capitalize on human thoughtlessness and the need to feel part of a large group. She and people like her are, unwittingly in most cases, behind "the jealous powers of destruction"; they back the "angry powers of the universe" to whom such a wide berth has to be given. It is no wonder that Herman is forced to admit that "even the years wasted in the hayloft in Lipsk had sometimes seemed a respite when set against the trouble Tamara had caused him during their years together" (p.63).

The hayloft in Lipsk is the political version of Herman's furnished room. The need for places of self-concealment is prevalent under totalitarian governments like Hitler's, which draw their support from human masses who disregard the most important needs of those closest to them and allow themselves to be manipulated, to be "penetrated" by charismatic leaders who pursue goals determined by their own individual psychopathology. Though Tamara was not a follower but a victim of Hitler, the masses which supported this tyrant were very similar to her in personality. Hitler's followers were people who, like Tamara in her youth, could slight and exile others without noticing at the private level, and then atone (become

⁸Singer loathed this type of person and decided very young, "I, Isaac, or Itchele, from Krochmalna Street, wouldn't let myself be hypnotized by anybody. I had to consider everything on my own and come to my own conclusions!" Isaac Bashevis Singer, Love and Exile (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1984) p.24.

one with) by dissolving into the multitude which was easily controlled, as it was in Germany, by the darkest needs of a ruthless and hypnotic demagogue. Hitler, the reigning tyrant in this novel (second only to God, with whom he is said to share a resemblance), is the cause for Herman's three years of hiding in the real hayloft. Young Tamara is the "dictator" who enacts for Herman the private horrors of social and reproductive life, just as she has adumbrated, without realizing it, collective totalitarianism.

Tamara, who in her maturity is presented as a superb human being full of kindness and compassion, is not just a harbinger of disaster for Herman; she is the force that unravels Herman's life. When she walks back into his existence, she opens the breach through which guilt and society enter to lay claim upon Herman, thus disturbing his elaborate and fragile act, and causing his figurative hayloft to collapse and leave him completely exposed.

Tamara's postwar irruption into Herman's life is announced in all its menace by the advertisement in the newspaper. This advertisement, which broadcasts the name of this reclusive man who has been trying so hard to be socially invisible, is more effective than the German bayonet of his nightmares, for it begins the process of slowly "flushing" him out. Through the ad, Masha and her mother are alerted to the presence of something new in Herman's life. But, in addition, something within Herman changes upon finding out that Tamara

is alive. For the first and only time in the novel, Herman momentarily feels "the common ambition of the refugee: to show that he had achieved a degree of success in America" (p.62). Herman becomes socially conscious; he still associates Tamara with a world in which it is necessary to prove oneself in a variety of ways Herman finds uncongenial and, even though he continues to adhere to his own ways, he becomes less assured in his defense of his hiding space.

With the return of Tamara, Herman knows immediately that he has lost control over his life and is again adrift in the turbulence of the real world. He reveals his feelings about this by reflecting that "some heavenly intelligence was conducting experiments on him, similar to those the German doctors had carried out on the Jews" (p.65). One experiment concerns guilt about his two children and the issue of reproducing. As soon as he sees Tamara, Herman is forced to remember that he "had not behaved toward them as a father should. At one time he had even denied their existence and played the role of a bachelor" (p.71). Tamara is the witness to his crime, and she doesn't refrain from reproaching Herman for his abandonment of their son and daughter. But in addition, Tamara shows that, although she certainly means well, she still does not understand Herman and continues to be very much the representative of the "powers" which terrify him. She gives his not having children by Yadwiga a social rather than a personal interpretation: "you married her," she

says, "since my father's grandchildren weren't good enough for you and you were ashamed of them as if they were scabs on your scalp, why shouldn't you have other children by Yadviga? Her father was certainly a finer man than mine" (p.77). Tamara still does not consciously realize that Herman's objections to reproduction are intellectual; any child, from even the highest rank of women, is a "scab on his scalp" because he categorically opposes reproduction.

Tamara, however, evinces an almost pathological interest in getting Herman to have children, even if their mother has to be the lowly Yadviga. When she finds out that Yadviga is actually pregnant, she "looked surprised but also as if she were about to burst out laughing" (p.188), persuaded perhaps that she was the indirect impregnator through the expedient of planting the idea in Herman's mind with her words, but also through her three-fold presence; her being one with her two dead children, a sort of trinity of Herman's guilt. When she hears that Yadviga does not yet have a doctor and hospital, Tamara promises to take care of these details and, from then on, there is a confederacy between the two women as Tamara becomes the champion of the unborn baby. Two very good women, who kiss each other profusely with a recognition of their natural commonality, join forces to assure Herman's genetic continuation. Tamara will do with Yadviga's assistance what she couldn't do alone, and Herman is totally defenseless.

Herman's helplessness is already notable, but as though the impending baby were not enough of a catastrophe, Tamara also brings Jewish society into Herman's Brighton Beach apartment. Her barging into the apartment, uninvited and unannounced, demolishes the invisible shield of privacy, the species of force field, that Herman has so laboriously built around his fairy-tale version of the original hayloft. Through the gap comes the nefariously good Mr. Pesheles ("you can't hide from Mr. Pesheles . . . He has spies everywhere" p. 225), followed by the well-meaning world at its worst and most intrusive. Tamara marches into the quiet retreat of Brighton Beach and leaves it a public place, exposed to the scrutiny and manipulation of the upholders of society. She says that she hasn't come to disturb the bliss (p.189), but while she is there, the dwelling becomes a pandemonium of noisiness and confusion. There is a tug of war between Herman and the two outsiders, Mrs. Schreier and Mr. Pesheles, whom Herman would prefer not to let in. Yadwiga is also reluctant to have these people visit, but when Herman returns to the kitchen the two uninvited guests have installed themselves comfortably and Mr. Pesheles is already well into his interrogation of Tamara. Then Rabbi Lampert also calls. Herman's idyllic hiding place has been completely and disastrously penetrated by the outside world.

Herman's debacle is a direct consequence of the events that occurred during Tamara's momentous visit. Ever since her

return from the dead, Herman the evader has been letting his guard down, and he now consents to attend Rabbi Lampert's party with Masha. Ironically, Mr Pesheles is one of the guests. Herman behaves as though he had been robbed of all his will. In a scene which is designed as if for the stage, Mr. Pesheles intervenes with the bulldozing powers of his gossipy and intrusive conversation, and Herman's edifice comes tumbling down to precipitate the events that seriously harm him.⁹ Pesheles not only discloses Herman's marriage to Yadviga but he also has extracted from Tamara the truth about her being Herman's first wife. The trigamist is publicly unveiled, to elicit the secret admirations of all males around him. But Herman is abandoned by Masha, the one wife he really loves. Tamara is now in full control.

After Masha's departure to New Jersey, Herman accepts the protection Tamara now offers him. Feeling like one of those "drifters whom society could neither assimilate nor reject, whose faces expressed failure, regret, guilt" (p.137), Herman agrees to do everything Tamara tells him, to let her be his manager. She commands him to go back to Yadviga and he obeys,

⁹Elsie Levitan, "The Cosmos of Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Critical View," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1. (1981). Levitan says that Herman "gets deeply involved and committed to three women, whose lives he ruins" (p.146). It seems to me that the novel ends with Tamara having exactly what she most wanted, Yadviga getting a good life for herself and her baby, and Masha choosing to die with the mother without whom she was incapable of living. Herman, on the other hand, ends up without his love, Masha. He is defeated by woman as mother.

but the apartment is now a home in a community of concerned people and busybodies. Tamara usurps the position of husband and takes care of arrangements for the birth as well as calling Yadviga everyday to talk to her in Polish. In addition, Yadviga's neighbors, who had been kept at a distance for so long, now "hover over her." They appropriate and control Yadviga while Tamara is absent. Herman is now a sort of outcast in his own refuge. Even the parakeets have joined the world; Marianna has laid a little egg. Herman is resigned to this and muses that he no longer feels like being in control of things; "he was willing to let the Powers lead him, whether they were called Chance or Providence or Tamara" (p.145).

Herman's identification of Tamara with the "Powers" in general, and with "Chance" and "Providence" in particular, reiterates the sense he always had of her as a representative of these conventional forces. She is a constructive, well-meaning person, who has always yearned to be a mother and still obviously longs for a child. The eagerness with which she latches on to Yadviga and her baby is part goodness and compassion and part the realization of her most cherished dreams. Like the powers, Tamara is relentless. Not only does she succeed in finally creating a home in which to raise properly the child Herman never wanted, but she is still planning to catch Herman herself. She ends the novel with the promise, which for Herman is a threat, to be married to Herman

in the next world. That Herman would prefer to be married to Masha or even to Yadviga (who is the only wife he ever married but out of his own volition) does not even occur to her because neither of the these two women fits the role of wife and mother of children as well as she does. Tamara is the "powers." Her personal objectives are indistinguishable from those of nature and society. She is, and will always be, the worst enemy an escapist like Herman can have.

Yadviga, the woman who hid Herman in the hayloft during the war, is very different from Tamara. She is an illiterate, Polish-Catholic peasant and a servant in Herman's parents' home; she is at the bottom of the novel's social ranks. Yadviga lost her father young and went to work as a domestic to run away from a brutal stepfather and an unsympathetic mother. Despite her unpromising background, Yadviga is remarkably independent in her judgements and enlighteningly good. Though she could have been expected to be a member of the Hitler-mesmerized masses, she seems to have responded to this monster with cool contempt: "they write books about such swine?" (p.12). She is untouched by the murderous anti-Semitism of the times and willingly hides Herman in the hayloft, even though she risks her life, as well as the lives of her sister and mother, by doing so. Yadviga has the quiet courage and simple morality of those who have little pretension.

Yadwiga's courage and morality are both collective and personal. She does not merely see the evil buried under Hitler's charismatic (and hypnotizing) surface, but she can also rise above concerns for her own happiness and well-being to do what she considers fair. When Tamara finally convinces her that she is not a ghost, Yadwiga is ready to sacrifice herself: "Pani Tamara, You stay here! I'm a simple peasant, uneducated, but I have a heart. It's your husband and your home. You suffered long enough" (p.193). She is willing to give up the man that is everything to her in order to relieve Tamara's misery.

Yadwiga is the only character in the novel who consistently demonstrates her belief in, and capacity for, free choice. She exercises it quietly against Hitler. Privately, though a member of a rigidly Catholic society, Yadwiga gives herself the freedom to choose her own religion. She becomes a Jew in order to honor the man she loves and to have a Jewish child. Yadwiga wants a baby for her own personal reasons, and also to contribute to the increase of the people whose elimination had been so malignantly pursued by Hitler. The natural urge toward self-continuation and the survival of the species governs her, but Yadwiga allows free choice to prevail. In opposition to both Tamara and Masha, Yadwiga obtains Herman's explicit consent (not because she is adhering to her old servant habits; she is quite capable of assertive behavior with Herman) for the conception of her child (p.171).

She proves to be the most trustworthy of the three women, one who rises above the terrors and narrowness of the political and the social and who masters gender by simply being a person. She functions like Esther in The Magician of Lublin: she has simple goodness, faith, and clings to the old ways. Like Esther did for Yasha, Yadviga recreates for Herman his vanished childhood home where the Jewish traditions survive. It is no wonder that her hayloft becomes a metaphor for Herman's life, as well as the situation he tries to replicate after he and Yadviga are married and living safely in New York.

The apartment that Yadviga and Herman share in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn is "like an enchanted palace in the stories that old village wives used to tell while spinning flax or striping feathers for down" (p.7). Yadviga particularly likes "the tub for daily baths that kept you clean and free of lice and fleas" (P.8). In this magic world, Yadviga only needs to push buttons and all her desires come true. She keeps this paradise sparkly clean and fragrant with the smell of Herman's favorite foods. The two other creatures with whom they share their idyllic place are Woytus and Marianna, two parakeets Herman gave her, who fly freely around the apartment nibbling crumbs from the lips of their owners. Yadviga is overwhelmed with her fairy-tale good fortune. She is filled with gratitude and devotion, and regards Herman as her "husband, brother, father, God" (p.8). He is everything; nothing outranks him.

This is the first and only situation in which a woman grants Herman a position he seems to desire, but he does not rise to the challenge of the prominence Yadviga confers upon him. Yadviga is the embodiment of a perfect hayloft, of an ideal place of refuge. She is a woman of essentials: simple, reliable, trustworthy, and loyal, and Herman succeeds in being very nice to her. He treats her kindly, and has enough fondness for her to sing her songs, take care of all her correspondence with her family, and offer to teach her the alphabet. But he finds that her "sheer goodness bored him" (p.23). She is life without Herman's need for the stimulus of impending evil and/or disaster. Yadviga's responsiveness to Herman's needs and wishes is such that she even stifles her desire for children and consents to isolate herself from the neighbors, of whose prying Herman is afraid. But being with her is very much like being alone and, though aloneness is something Herman wants, he misses the tension of a bit of strife, of a certain measure of menace. She offers Herman a very unusual challenge, but instead of detecting in her behavior the possibility of being able to build a life of mutuality, Herman deceives her--a sign that the life of stasis he has built up at Brighton Beach is as unsatisfying as the eternal carnival which goes on outside their window. Yadviga's "sheer goodness" is no match for excitement. Fairy tales are no good without a wicked witch.

Masha is the wicked witch of selfishness and priestess of sexual love who holds Herman captive in a web of psychopathology. Charles Madison maintains that Singer "tends to overstress the traits and egocentricities of his characters,"¹⁰ and this certainly seems to be the case with Masha. She represents a current of luxurious, chaotic female energy which makes Tamara's social decorum and Yadwiga's personal enlightenment and goodness seem insipid. Compared to Masha, Tamara is a reproductive and social robot devoid of grace, imaginativeness and daring, and Yadwiga a simple peasant whose ethical conscience is the logical outcome of her background and of her scarcity of intellectual and psychic power. Masha is an overwhelming force who entrances men and keeps Herman hostage with the lure of her physical attractiveness and the fascination of her accurate, perverse, and inventive mind.

Masha outrages her mother and seems to deeply gratify Herman with her aggressively phrased opinions. An extremely outspoken woman who uses language with relish, she frequently analyses the war experience, arriving at very striking conclusions. She is the one character in the novel who sees (or is not afraid to admit that she sees) the connection between a God-aspiring dictator and a dictatorial God, she is the one who gives expression to the realization that God and

¹⁰Charles A. Madison, Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) p.499.

Hitler share a great deal in common.¹¹ She asserts that "God does not care. That's how God is" (p.37), that he "eats human flesh, [and] approves of slaughter" (p.33), and that "Jews must be slaughtered--that's what God wants" (p.37). She is sure that "what He [God] wanted, Hitler did" (p.110). Herman does not seem to disagree with her, for he tells her that she still does not have to do everything God wants, but he does not himself express such drastic views. It is only after Masha's words that he ponders, "wasn't it possible that a Hitler presided on high and inflicted suffering on imprisoned souls?" (p.53). She gives him courage to allow himself to try to see clearly also.

Seeing is something Masha strives to do realistically, without sentimentality, and she admits that she is aware of the doubleness of love and affection, of the immanence of hostility and ambivalence in any relationship. Self-snared, as she is, in a symbiotic relationship with her mother, she still

¹¹See also Alice Miller, Thou Shalt Not Be Aware. Translated by Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum (New York: New American Library, 1986. Like Masha, Miller directly connects our dictatorial God with recent history's most brutal tyrant. She theorizes that "Adolf Hitler owed his great popularity to the cruel and inhuman principles of infant- and child-rearing prevalent in the Germany of his day" (p.21). She believes that then, as nowadays, "our whole system of raising and educating children provides the power hungry with a ready-made network they can use to reach the destination of their choice. They need only to push the buttons that parents and educators have already installed" (p.20). Miller wonders if "the coercive measures of 'poisonous pedagogy' would have less power over us and our culture if the Judeo-Christian tradition had not lent them strong support" (p.94) in order to insure our continued obedience to the "irritable, hypersensitive, didactic, authoritarian father" (p.93) of the Old Testament.

calls her a dictator, and when Shifrah Puah moans: "you would think I was her worst enemy, the way she talks," Masha counters: "Mama, you know the proverb: 'God protect me from my friends, I will protect myself from my enemies'" (p.40). After Rabbi Lampert demonstrates his goodness by offering her a high-paying job and full care for her mother and Yadviga in order to make it possible for her and Herman to go back to each other, Masha calls the Rabbi an angel and tells Herman: "he has more heart in his fingernail than you can have in your whole being" (p.258). But when Herman says that Tamara is also an angel, Masha makes one of her most wonderfully double-edged observations, she says: "introduce her to the rabbi. Two angels may bring forth a new God" (p.251). The world may be in need of a new God, considering the Nazi propensities of the present one, or such generosity as that displayed by Lambert and Tamara must have a counterpart of natural evil which is potent enough to replicate the present iniquitous, Hitler-supporting deity.

Masha is skeptical and realistic about herself also. She readily confesses: "the Nazis forced me to do things for so long that I can't do anything of my own free will anymore. If I want to do something, I have to imagine that a German is standing over me with a gun" (p.35). She is aware that the safety and freedom of the United States may constitute burdens certain refugees are not strong enough to bear and that, for this reason, "slavery isn't such a tragedy after all--for

getting things done, there is nothing better than a whip" (p.35). Off on holiday, looking out a window at a lake full of pleasure boats, Masha seems to feel the guilt and ennui of those who have learned to define themselves through enmity, of those who have chiseled their personality through continuous conflict and combat: "Where are the Nazis? What kind of world is this without Nazis? A backward country, this America" (p.110). Here she is, sampling resorts for pleasure and relaxation. No one is asking her to prove her identity by producing the correct papers, much less attempting to drive her to slavery or death. No one cares one way or another. Outside, boats move around in idleness, aimlessly, operated by people whose most serious concern is how to increase delight in a situation in which the only thing they have to press against is time. A backward country indeed! An advanced country is one where the enemy is easy to spot. This allows a person to develop an accurate sense of direction: to be certain where to discharge her hostility so as to be purged by its release and revitalized by the fire of well-directed invective.

Masha is good at openly practicing enmity, but in America, since there is no tyrant to revile, she has to content herself with employing her skills against her mother, Herman, and Yadviga. She constantly provokes Shifrah Puah, orders her around, accuses her of being infuriatingly pious and narrow-minded and of tormenting her, and contradicts her

so much that Herman is obliged to reproach her for her behavior. With Herman, Masha is as passionately caustic as she is passionate in bed. She berates him for spending too much time with Yadviga, taunts him by threatening to go back to her husband, indicates that he is irresolute and can only act in response to ultimatums, and calls him a fraud and a devil. Masha exults in calling Yadviga a stupid peasant and suggests that Yadviga give her baby up for adoption. Masha has the ruthlessness of her own excessive, amoral vitality. Even the saintly Tamara is forced to express her condemnation: "You don't take a man away from a woman who is in the last weeks of pregnancy. You have to be a bitch to do that" (p.259). Herman is not blind to Masha's faults but, as he tells Tamara, "This kind of talk is useless. I can't live without Masha, and I don't have the guts to kill myself" (p.260).

Fiery Masha is the only person capable of energizing Herman. She explodes and scintillates with anger, while he represses it and allows it to depress and deaden him. She is the conduit for his inchoate aggressiveness. Herman is someone "without belief in himself or in the human race; a fatalistic hedonist who lived in pre-suicidal gloom" (p.30). For him everything is pervaded by this negativity, which he effortlessly projects on the inanimate world. He can regard the city and muse that one street "couldn't make up its mind whether to remain part of the neighborhood or to give up and disappear" (p.32), just like he can't decide whether he is

part of the human community or wants to hide away from it permanently. But Masha can dispel his anger-fueled gloom and his spiritual flaccidity. Herman, indignant at the deceitful justice of the world, has decided "to shut his eyes, stop up his ears, close his mind, live like a worm" (p.19). And he discovers that this depression, this chronic fatigue, which the years of Hitlerism left him with, cannot be gotten rid of "except when he made love to Masha" (p.41).

For Masha, sex is religious ritual, art, and history. She initiates her ceremony, like a priestess should, from a vertical position. While Herman lies down, she sits surrounded by the sparks and smoke of her numerous cigarettes: a fire goddess subliminally promising renewal and augmentation through the reverse magic of combustion and spenditure. Later, in bed, she will allow the sparks to land on the sheet, frightening and exciting Herman with her intimations of impending conflagration, with the threatened reenactment of the Holocaust. She is fully clothed, as befits her role, and her dark reddish hair, which Herman says is fire and pitch, emits its own flames; it is like a veil of fireflies floating eerily around her dazzlingly white complexion. The lips that hold the cigarette are full and sensuous, but the cheeks are hollow and the cheekbones high, imperious, almost ascetic. The eyes go with the lips; though light blue, like a limpid sky, they sparkle with green, feline flecks. Like both wild cat and priestess, "Masha seemed hardly to require sleep" (p.46) and,

like a true divinity, she can discard aspects of her humanity and can "temporarily stop the bleeding during her period" (p.47) in order to bring her ritual to a completion, which often is not reached until daybreak.

The second stage of the ceremony requires a slight transmutation: from priestess to narrative artist. "Masha compared herself to Scheherazade" (pp.44-45) who had to tame a murderous monarch and save her life by dint of language. Masha is herself a monarch; she occupies a sort of throne and reigns over her partner. But like Scheherazade, Masha tells stories to stay alive and to maintain her precarious sanity. She also helps preserve Herman's life and sanity.

Masha transforms her wanderings through the ruins of Europe into an epic. Within a disgraceful and brutal war, men heroically pursue her love. They set out after Masha as if she were another Helen or Aphrodite, beautiful enough to quell their restlessness, effect their rescue from their own pugnaciousness, and turn each of them into a contented Paris. Herman is made to feel simultaneously uncertain and privileged: the possessor of a goddess, but for how long? And how many others have been, and will be, as fortunate as he? This uncertainty is just what Masha wants, and she asks: What about him? Does he remember his past affairs? How long would he wait if Masha were to die? In short: Does he realize how fragile the art of love is? And, does he see what a momentous

event each sexual encounter is if it is so fancifully verbalized and so titillatingly fictionalized?

Masha, like Singer, is a master of more than one literary genre. When talking about her estranged husband, Leo Tortshiner, she becomes a practitioner of picaresque narrative and zestfully dwells on the man's infractions as if she were secretly proud of them, as if she were vicariously indulging in his peccadillos. And when wishing to talk about the dead, Masha dreams about them and then wakes Herman up to prove to him her command of the supernatural tale, and to show him "the scars the dead had left on her arms, her breasts, her thighs." Even the dead favor her erogenous zones. Masha father's appears in her supernatural productions and reads to her verses written in the other world. The priestess and the authoress merge to remember a stanza and recite it to Herman.

Of course, Masha's narratives are also history. Her fictionalizations do not obscure the concrete events. The horrors are still palpable, but (as in Singer's novels) so are the folly and wickedness of both aggressor and victim. Many of her protagonists died or were trapped in Soviet Russia, but there are many others in Canada and in New York. They recognize her in the cafeteria and seem to find it easy to lead normal lives. Masha rants about the uselessness of it all: "the moral of her tales was that if it had been God's purpose to improve His chosen people by Hitler's persecution, He had failed" (p.45). No one has learned anything from this

obscurity. According to Masha, God is either inept or malignant.

It is perhaps Masha's acknowledgement and acceptance of her own lack of improvement and of her undiminished perversity that Herman finds most stimulating. With her, he can consider the possibility of retaliation; he can wonder whether she would enjoy torturing a Nazi murderer, thus revealing his own awareness of the sexual connotations of torture and the commonality of impulse which links victimizer and victim. But also, he can briefly vent the anger by whose repression his vitality is habitually consumed. They talk about making love with members of the same sex, and imagine a world with no other humans left to try to ascertain how they would feel about animalism. Nothing is too wicked for the charismatic Masha, and Herman thrives in her presence. He soaks in her energy and replenishes himself in her embrace of narrative and sex. Instead of re-emerging exhausted from her realm, he withdraws enriched and rejuvenated, fertilized with new ideas and insights.

Because of Masha, "Herman had begun to understand why union, the joining of male and female, was so important in the Cabala" (p.47). The manner in which she integrates so many disparate things into an atmosphere for loving makes Herman realize that difference is precisely what is essential in union. Man and woman represent disparateness seeking fusion, and in their entwining they should also incorporate the world.

The love chamber, in fulfillment of Asa Heshel's (and Singer's) theories, should be sacred temple and cathartic theater, enlightened classroom and open forum, a space for physical and intellectual acrobatic feats, a darkened cavern in which to face internal and external demons, a microcosm of all that is human.

Herman's revitalization through Masha is so complete that he totally loses his ordinary weariness and fatalism. Instead of breathing the fetid fumes of his obsessive, repetitive fantasies about hiding from the Nazis, he now inhales the breezes of insight. Feeling radiantly recharged by Masha's tempestuous love, he decides that everything is energy: like his firebrand woman, like the ignited air in which they melt together, like his mind which cannot stop churning:

At moments when Herman fantasized about a new metaphysics, or even a new religion, he based everything on the attraction of the sexes. In the beginning was lust. The godly, as well as the human, principle is desire. Gravity, light, magnetism, thought may be aspects of the same universal longing. Suffering, emptiness, darkness are nothing more than interruptions of a cosmic orgasm that grows forever in intensity. . . (p.48)

Herman is ready to tackle a new cosmogony, to come up with his own theory of the genesis of the universe. The beginning of everything is lust, desire, distilled and potent energy. This gravity, this magnetism brings about matings which engender luminosity of vision and of thought. The cosmos is designed for sustained orgasm. When the heavenly climax is disturbed

(by the failure of uniting human energy), suffering, emptiness and darkness ensue. Were human beings to heed their cosmic hunger for conjunction the way he and Masha do, perpetual happiness could be assured.

Regretfully for both, Masha is not a recluse devoted only to her relationship with Herman. She is not as aware as he is of the fragility of their arrangement, but mainly, she dwells in the real world. Herman can write at any of his homes (Rabbi Lampert complains that he does not use the office), but Masha has to face the city and the cafeteria crowd everyday. When she gets a vacation, she naturally wants to get away. The trip to the Adirondacks is a dive. These two lovers, who depend on artifice, on the mind-made universe of their isolated bedchamber, step out into territory too vast for their control. In the country, Herman rediscovers his fellowship with the nonhuman inhabitants of the planet but feels acutely his separation from his own Jewish community,¹² like the ant that "had separated itself from the anthill and now had to make out on its own" (p.113); and he finds that in the city he "never stopped longing for nature, the out-of-doors, but actually he was not suited for this tranquility" (p.118).

¹²David Seed, "The Community in I. B. Singer's Fiction," Yiddish 4.2 (1980): 18. Seed believes that Herman's "fate dramatizes, in extreme form, the ultimate impossibility of Singer reconciling his stance toward America with his allegiance to Jewish cultural tradition." I see this tension between inherited tradition and the advantages clearly inherent in secularized, democratic ways in many of Singer heroes and heroines. But I incline to the opinion that Singer loved his American passport more than he loved Jewishness.

Masha drinks, is more vehement in her jealousy of Yadviga, and shows clearly that "she had little faith in [Herman's] physical prowess" (p.118). While rowing in the lake "Herman heard a splash, as if some monster were lurking in the water, silently swimming after them, ready to capsize the boat at any moment" (p.118), and they almost come to grief due to a rock which "was sticking out of the water, jagged and pointed, covered with moss" (p.119). Back in the bungalow, immediately after this, Herman wonders: "Did he know [Masha]?" (p.119). He examines her features and tries to guess what is on her mind when she jumps up, says she has been dreaming about her father, asks what day of the month it is, and declares: "'It's been seven weeks since I've had my visitor'" (p.119).

The animal world elicits Herman's sympathy but "every contact with people evoked terror in him" (p.117), so his interlude with nature discloses to him that his separation from other Jews is something he cannot help. Nature proves mentally desirable but actually untenable for both him and Masha. He is irked by the tranquillity and stirred by immemorial fears. The lake elicits Masha's apprehension of confronting nature with an inept man (a man of intellect and sex only), and the monster-made splash Herman hears symbolizes Herman's dread of femaleness, of the frightful creature which lurks inside the female body demanding fulfillment in reproduction, agitating for the capsizing of unproductive sex to cause spillage and insemination.

The rock, jagged, pointed and covered with moss, evokes a variety of interpretations. It may be Herman's apparently inexhaustible sexual strength. But it may also be his conceptualization of love and sex, his and Masha's mind-fabricated world striving to detach itself from the liquid which is the urge toward biological continuation. This biological urge makes Masha dream of her father, who presumably speaks with nature's voice to ask for progeny. But the rock can also represent the dangerous desire for insertion into a society which is already captivating Masha as she exults in the admiration of males and females at the resort. The boat ride certainly brings together all these pressures which make Masha's imagination miscarry and conceive the false pregnancy. She is now becoming one more female trying to pull Herman into the realm of nature and society from which he has always wished to secede. It is no wonder that her features seem suddenly unfamiliar to him. Masha is suffering a metamorphosis; she is changing from what he wants her to be to what he knows her to be. He later acknowledges having known all along that she was not solely the numinous entity of their sexual sessions, but also a normal woman.

With all her negativism, Masha had retained the normal instincts. She wanted a husband, children, a household. She loved music, the theater, and laughed at the actor's jokes. But in Herman there resided a sorrow that could not be assuaged. He was not a victim of Hitler. He had been a victim long before Hitler's day. (p.121)

Herman's victimization continues. With Masha's false pregnancy comes marriage by a rabbi and the couple's immersion into the expectations and conventions of the type of life Herman has been so strenuously dodging. Shifrah Puah, who previously "behaved toward him like a mother-in-law" (p.48) and catered to him so much that he felt embarrassed, now expects him to fulfill his new role as husband. Since Herman does not, she complains about his behavior continuously and, ironically, forbids "him to call her 'mother-in-law.'" Only the most necessary words passed between them" (p.177). In addition, as a result of his brief break with Masha, due to her ex-husband's intrusion in their affairs, Herman consented to have a child with Yadviga and now she has also missed her period. Herman is threatened with what he most dreads:

He didn't want to admit it, but of all his fears the greatest was his fear of again becoming a father. He was afraid of a son and more afraid of a daughter, who would be an even stronger affirmation of the positivism he had rejected, the bondage that had no wish to be free, the blindness that wouldn't admit it was blind. (p.149)

Masha with a false pregnancy and Yadviga with a real one have trapped him in a net he helped to weave. With Yadviga, he has agreed to his own "bondage" and has shown willingness to surrender his freedom and accept his limitations. With Masha he is disabled by the love he bears her and by his inability to live without her revitalizing powers. Herman is paralyzed in the natural net of procreation.

However, this is not the only danger looming ahead. Masha is also showing greater interest in society. In opposition to Herman, who believes that "every human contact was a potential danger to him" (p.56), Masha does not actively shun others. On vacation, Herman noticed her enjoyment of other people's company. When the gregarious Rabbi Lampert forcibly works his way into their lives, Masha responds as though she had been almost eager for the glitter of the world outside her sexual temple, for the wealth and glamour the rabbi represents. Herman walks in the apartment where she is sitting with the rabbi, to find that the normal stream of Masha's vitality is effervescing and dissipating in a profusion of champagne bubbles. She is speaking in a loud voice, wearing a party dress, and does not notice Herman. She is engrossed in a new performance for which the rabbi is the main prop--aided by his roses and champagne--and is also the audience. When she sees Herman, her guilt and uncertainty strike, and she feels obliged to vow her loyalty: "'I'm your wife. Everything here is yours!'" (p.207). These are strange but necessary assurances since Masha is about to try her magic publicly, at the rabbi's party.

To prepare for the party, Masha first completes her transformation from Fire Goddess to mere Cinderella. She preserves a bit of autonomy: she is unencumbered by a fairy godmother. She works frantically, selecting items and accessories, and turning an old dress into a new masterpiece

(like Cinderella), and Herman understands that "she craved to be a success at the party, to outshine all the other women with her elegance, her good looks" (p.211). She does. Men gravitate toward her as they always have, but none of them is the bestower of social luster she yearns for. Rabbi Lampert is married, Yasha Kotik ungentlemanly reveals unflattering aspects of her past, and Mr. Pesheles, while declaring her to be beautiful as a picture, pulls the rug from under her by publicly exposing her trigamist husband. Herman, never one to excel socially, is now reduced to a crumpled up, vomit-soiled wreck whose disclosed entanglements inflict a humiliating blow upon her. When Masha accepts the job offer from Rabbi Lampert, she is capitulating. Repeating what happened to Yasha with Emilia, Masha reacts to Herman's humiliating exposure at the party by abdicating her status as priestess/witch, and tossing her devotee, Herman, into the cold. She then becomes part of the world in which Herman cannot help but be constantly "angl[ing] his chair still farther away from the group" (p. 216).

Upon discovering that the world is not for her either, at least not without Herman, Masha returns momentarily to her role as psychic dominatrix. She compels Herman to leave Yadviga and to agree to go away with her. However, when her mother becomes seriously ill, Masha emits "a sound unlike her own voice--catlike and primitive" and indicts everybody, including Herman, for this: "she tore her hair, stamped her

feet, leaped at Herman as if to attack him," and then she screams: "'This is what you wanted! Enemies! Bloody enemies!'" (p.265). Masha descends from her throne of magic and of art to plant her feet on the ground which is about to swallow her. She is metamorphosed again, this time into a sub-human creature, a frightened beast. Under the sway of an atavistic fear, she sputters anger at those closest to her because without her mother the world, for her, is nothing but enmity.

If Tamara and Yadviga are overtaken by undefeatable nature to fulfill the functions of birth (overtaken by nature and children), Masha is being claimed by mother and death, by a tomb-womb. As soon as her mother dies, she loses her charisma, her hypnotic powers. Her gaze is no longer entrancing, and Herman, about to commit suicide with her, exposes her deviousness as the one means of escape out of her paralyzing, deadly net. His asking her if she has ever been unfaithful to him, a question whose answer he suspects, is the best proof of Masha's waning powers.

But he still loves her and wants her to come with him on his next act of escape. He wants her to evade with him the duties to life and death and continue the secret rituals that give meaning to his life. Herman is one of those dreamers, who, as Robert Alter says referring to literature's traditional dreamers started with Don Quixote, "madly and persistently tried to live out his shining dream in a grey existence stolidly resistant to dreams and intolerant of their

perpetrators."¹³ Masha, who without her mother is neither priestess nor witch, not even adult woman, casts him out. She declares him to be a stranger. Bonnie Lyons claims that "the failure to achieve sexual love is often the sign in Singer's work of general existential failure, a signal of a character's destructive soul/body split that often results in alienation, insanity, and death."¹⁴ This is the case with Masha, who realizes her inability to love as an adult and is ready for death. Already half submerged into mother and mother earth, she pronounces sentence and brutally expels Herman.

Herman does not want to die or he would do so with the woman he loves. He is not really a modern literary hero but a Yiddish one, and in Yiddish writing "life is still beating urgently at the doors of art"¹⁵ and Herman still wants to figure life out. His specialties are evasion and concealment, not suicide. When Masha exiles him, she may be performing her last magic trick. By tossing him out, she may be forcing Herman to become an American and search for his next hayloft in the open spaces of his adopted country. If, as Leslie

¹³Robert Alter, "Jewish Dreams and Nightmares" in Contemporary American Jewish Literature, Critical Essays, ed. Irving Malin (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973) p.63.

¹⁴Bonnie Lyons, "Sexual Love in I. B. Singer's Work," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1. (1981): 61.

¹⁵Irving Howe, "Introduction to Yiddish Literature," Breakthrough: A Treasure of Contemporary American Jewish Literature, Ed. Irving Malin and Irwin Stark (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965) p.287.

Fielder says, "this makes him disconcertingly like Huckleberry Finn, that is fair enough in light of the fact that his strategy throughout the novel has been, not unlike Huck's, to 'flee from evil, hide from danger, avoid showdowns.'"¹⁶ The legendary American West is so vast that it constitutes a sort of hayloft in which it is easy to be anonymous, inconspicuous, a historically validated place for "getting lost." The West is a place where Herman could conceivably become, in reality, the sort of "lone ranger" he is in temperament. However, this can only happen if he finds an occupation among gentiles who would be less likely to press their friendship on him and interrogate him about his past. This is not a very likely possibility since Herman's main area of expertise is religion. Nevertheless, the novel does offer this possibility of "openness."

A less optimistic reading of Enemies could regard Herman's actions as a withdrawal from the demands of life and claim that his behavior is the equivalent of Yasha's self-imprisonment. In Karen Horney's terms, both Yasha and Herman first try to move toward people and then give up that strategy and move away from others.

¹⁶Leslie Fielder, "The American-ness of the Jewish American Writer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-81): 130.

Enemies is not, however, as Theodore L. Steinberg says, "almost unrelentingly negative."¹⁷ On the contrary, the novel ends in hope. As Dorothy Bilik points out, "the fictional existence of Herman's child is recognition of the potential for new life in America even for these tortured survivors. Continuity and the promise of future generations are not found in Singer's novels set in Europe."¹⁸ The novel also ends in Americanness: little Masha is very American in that she is a hybrid, a "melting-pot" product. Her situation conforms to American ideals regarding children in that she is surrounded by adults who are devoted to her happiness and well-being. In addition, she was conceived by choice and in freedom, an embodiment of the hope for more attention to choice and consent in reproduction.

Little Masha is also the representation of Jewish hope and continuation in the New World. This hope of Jewish survival is not there through compulsion and indoctrination nor through the ideas advocated by Singer in public, which decry inter-marriage and assimilation, but through what his artistic brain planted in subtle hints all along the corpus of the work. Volition, human will, adaptability, and choice are triumphant in this novel through Yadviga and little Masha.

¹⁷Theodore, L. Steinberg, "I. B. Singer: Responses to Catastrophe," Yiddish 1. 4, (Spring 1975): 9.

¹⁸Dorothy Bilik, "Singer's Diasporan Novel: Enemies, a Love Story," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 99.

Singer the man may preach adherence to one's own religious inheritance, but Singer the artist believes in people selecting their religion for reasons of love.¹⁹ Like Wanda/Sarah in The Slave, Kosoka in The King of the Fields, and Koza In "Joseph and Koza,"²⁰ Yadviga rejects the religion of her childhood (the faith indoctrinated in her before she was mature enough for choice), and she adopts the religion of the man she loves. Dorothy Bilik calls Yadviga a bovine peasant and claims that her "conversion to Judaism is mindless, emotional, and ritualistic, and therefore equivalent to the watered-down Judaism of the Americanized Jewish immigrant whom Singer satirizes."²¹ Bilik is wrong. Yadviga is the opposite of bovine. She is a spirited peasant whom the author admires and rewards (just as he admires other gentile women in his fiction who convert because of love). Through her, Singer shows that compulsion is unhealthy and

¹⁹More precisely, according to his novels, Singer believes in Gentile women converting to Judaism for reasons of love. Irving H. Buchen in "The Devil and I. B. Singer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 29, says that "the final betrayal to Singer always takes the form of conversion." If this is so, it is only in regards to the conversion of Jews to a different religion. Frankly, I have never "felt" Singer to be truly committed to this type of chauvinism.

²⁰Isaac Bashevis Singer, The Slave (New York: Avon Books, 1962), The King of the Fields (New York: New American Library, 1988), Stories for Children (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984)pp.139-154.

²¹Dorothy Bilik, "Singer's Diasporan Survivor" in Immigrant Survivors: Post-Holocaust Consciousness in Recent American Jewish Fiction (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981) p.121.

counterproductive. It stifles artistic creation and it suffocates love, and love means continuation. It is through choice that one can heal the rends in the fabric of the group. It is not Herman the scholar who is to thank for the one surviving child in the fiction, but Yadviga who, although she is an uneducated peasant, demonstrates how healthy and admirable human minds and hearts can be. She makes important choices, an impossible thing for anybody to do according to the advocates of social determinism. First she chooses not to be an anti-Semite in spite of the fact that she belonged to a religion and a country which made their hatred of Jews a main means of expression. Second, she chooses to imperil her own life and that of her family by acting according to her convictions and hiding Herman in the hayloft. Third, she chooses to become a Jew herself to be able to have the children of the man she loved and to blend with his community.²² Her baby has the name of Masha, the love goddess, and the care of two good mothers. Little Masha is the

²²Sarah Blacher Cohen, "From Hens to Roosters," Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986). Cohen believes that Yadviga wants to convert to Judaism "to insure Broder's not leaving her" (p.78). There is no evidence of this in the novel. On the contrary, Herman married Yadviga of his own free will--not because of pregnancy as he did Tamara and Masha--and stays with her voluntarily. Her desire to become Jewish is sincere, and may even be connected with her desire to reject her anti-Semitic Catholicism. It is interesting that most critics see Yadviga so stereotypically and fail to judge her according to her true actions which clearly show her to be a person of great integrity and courage.

product of Herman's three wives and this grants the hope that all will be well with her.

Herman, little Masha's errant father, is a sort of casualty of the natural and social powers that sever men and women, but he is mainly a fugitive of his own deficiencies. In his urges, he is also a pioneer, and his personality conforms to this. One can imagine him "out there" still being his old questioning and lustful self, still attempting to understand everything, trying to escape his own gloom and striving to live up to the mysterious thing in him that made the love of such good women possible. One hopes that he is still trying to attain that perfect linkage of male and female which can dispense with some the compulsions of nature and society and replace them with creativity and choice.

CHAPTER VII

"MENASHE AND RACHEL" AND SHOSHA: FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD AND BACK

"Menashe and Rachel"¹ is one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's Hanukkah tales for children. It is a sparkly little story full of wonder and charm which, at first glance, does not appear to be characteristic of an author whose adult work has sometimes scandalized and alienated his own Yiddish community.² Upon close examination, however, it is clear that "Menashe and Rachel" derives its power precisely from the fact that it is a story about Singer which exemplifies his most provocative theories regarding love, life and creativity. The story is also one more attempt on Singer's part to bend the world to his purposes and to wrest from life his most cherished objective of perfect union between male and female. After

¹Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Menashe and Rachel," The Power of Light, pictures by Irene Lieblich (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980) pp. 31-39. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

²Joseph Landis, "I. B. Singer--Alone in the Forest," Yiddish 6. 2-3 (Summer and Fall 1985): 5. Landis refers to Singer as a writer who "initially repelled" many Yiddish readers because of his insistent quarrels with God. Leslie Fielder, "Isaac Bashevis Singer; or, The American-ness of the American Jewish Writer," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 124. Fielder comments that "Singer's work seems too demonic and erotic to be properly 'Jewish'."

discussing "Menashe and Rachel," I want to examine Singer's novel Shosha, which I consider an adult rewriting of the children's tale, showing yet another idealized love union, this time between adult male and childlike female.

In "Menashe and Rachel," Singer is at his most willful and devious. He turns a story for children into love story, he conjures up two children who are accomplished fabricators of their own reality and fierce defenders of their actual and imagined universes, and he creates a situation of relative freedom for his two young protagonists by making them inmates in a poorhouse.

"Menashe and Rachel" is the story of two children who, like all human beings, find that their developmental goals (which they share with their author), place them in open conflict with the outside world. They are members of a religion which tightly controls the relationship between the sexes, and it is around this issue that their confrontation with adults occurs. Menashe and Rachel are deeply attached to each other, but some women, on whose charity the poorhouse partially depends, feel that "Menashe [is] already a half-grown boy and a scholar, and there is no sense in his playing around with a little girl." Other "do-gooders" also believe "that the children should be parted by force" (p.32) Rachel's response is to threaten to drown herself if they are separated, and Menashe promises to bite the hand of any who try to pull them apart.

The already thriving love affair, the children's quick, protective response to the adults, and the author's contempt for the "do-gooders" make it immediately apparent that life in the poorhouse is a sort of blessing, and that the author is very much in favor of the children's having their way. By comparison, a normal home, complete with mother father and siblings, is a horrifying place. Since Menashe and Rachel are not in normal homes of their own because they have lost their parents, orphanhood is shown to be a desirable state.

Isaac Bashevis Singer is refreshingly candid about his youthful inclinations toward orphanhood. In the autobiographical pieces, he uses the claim to be an orphan as his favorite lie. In "A Day of Pleasures" and "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw,"³ for example, young Isaac tells strangers that he has no parents. For Isaac, the fantasy of orphanhood seems to have been an expanded and refined version of the traditional family romance. Instead of fantasizing that he will be restored to wealthier and more important progenitors, from whom he has long been separated, young Isaac prefers to fantasize that he will be set free (sent to the poorhouse) because he has no progenitors at all. This is perhaps the same impulse which causes Singer to make Yasha Mazur a self-conjuring magician, and Herman Broder a fugitive and exile

³Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Day of Pleasures" In My Father's Court (New York: Fawcet Crest, 1966) pp.108-113. "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw," Stories for Children (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984) pp.53-70.

from society and the "powers." Orphanhood (or a retreat from the group) guarantees autonomy.

This is certainly the case for Menashe and Rachel. Their orphanhood lands them in a place infinitely better than the richest castle. Their living in the poorhouse makes it possible for them to spend most of their time together. The adult world is still interested in exerting its power but, because of the circumstances, its impact is minimal. The situation is close to ideal. Adults supply shelter and food--including the ubiquitous Hanukkah pancakes--but cannot provide the type of surveillance that would be normal in a home. There is just one warden to keep track of an unstated number of children and, since the warden is frequently occupied with keeping mischievous ones in line, the well-behaved protagonists have abundant time to pursue their own goals.

The children's main goal is togetherness. They treasure each other's company and talk openly of their love and their plans to marry when they grow up. Their mutual affection is acknowledged by the adults and is eventually accepted by all after the Lublin rabbi says that they should be left in peace, thereby implying that both the father and God, whom the rabbi represents, approve of the relationship. At the ages of only nine and eight respectively, Menashe and Rachel are granted complete freedom to conduct their love affair away from the constraints of society, but with the blessing and approval of society's highest representative. They dwell in a magic

universe in which all their needs are met by people to whom they are not obliged to pay complete obedience, and they have paternal and divine protection.

However, a great deal of violence has been necessary to insure this ideal situation. Singer's family romance is one which seeks to obliterate the family and neutralize society. Father and mother are ruthlessly disposed of, and society is kept at a comfortable distance. The traditional mother is here reduced to narrow-minded females who, though they do provide Hanukkah pancakes, have a tendency to meddle and to impede. The father, split into warden and rabbi, is much nicer: his two halves combine to grant approval to the children's wishes. But these father figures preside over a poorhouse, surely a horrifying setting for the upbringing of children. Singer's choice of a poorhouse is testimony to his bleak views of parenthood and of family life, a creative passing of judgment on his own beloved family. The normal home is a poor house when it comes to stimulating full growth and creativity, he implies. Through reversal, a poorhouse may prove the kind of home children would really enjoy having, one where there is support and approval without hindrance of thought and of action. He also indicts society. The poorhouse is a freer place to grow up in because it is at the margins of society. The meager funding, low status, and scant attention society grants its places of charity make the poorhouse paradisiacal. Were it more highly regarded, the poorhouse would be like an

expensive boarding school, worse than a home. It is the poorhouse's marginality which makes it perfect for the two young protagonists.

Menashe and Rachel use their paradisiacal situation to reinterpret their position in the world, to develop a theology of equality with God by claiming a sort of fellowship of creators and seers, and to strive for an even greater paradise. Their means for accomplishing these aims is imagining and telling stories.

Storytelling becomes the children's main activity for self-definition and development, just as it has always been for Singer himself. Like these children, Singer had to create imaginative universes to satisfy his developmental needs and to experiment with various versions and aspects of his self. He had to enlarge an environment which was too narrow and limited for his purposes, just as Menashe and Rachel are forced to do with theirs. But as if to demonstrate that the superior power of the imagination can triumph over any circumstances, Singer gives the protagonists of this little story a handicap he did not have: Menashe and Rachel are blind.

The loss of eyesight can result in eventual cortical blindness (a loss of the brain's ability to construct visual images) "owing to the fact that the visual cortex now has nothing to work with: it cannot manufacture images indefinitely, when there is no longer any stimulus and input

from the eyes."⁴ The consolation of people who lose their eyesight is that, eventually, the initial bereftness of blindness is replaced "by a new sense of life and creativity and identity" (Sacks, p. 8).

Menashe's and Rachel's experience illustrates blind people's ability to construct a distinct sense of creativity and identity, in spite of their lack of eyesight. But, instead of cortical blindness, the children experience an excess of imagery and inventiveness. In fact, it is on their ability to visualize, to create images, that they build their unique identities. Their supposed handicap is transformed into an advantage. After six years of blindness, Menashe envisions "'a giant so tall his head reached the clouds.'" This giant has "'huge horns and a nose as big as the trunk of an elephant'" (p.37). This visual inventiveness makes Menashe such a compelling story-maker that even the adults listen to him when they have the time. He knows that his narratives help increase his self-esteem, and he wants Rachel to imitate him. Eventually he persuades her also to narrate her own fantasies, dreams, and stories.

Rachel uses her very first story to reinterpret their condition. She astonishes Menashe by declaring that they both can see. "'Everyone thought that Menashe and Rachel were blind, but they saw'" (p.36) And Rachel also demonstrates the

⁴Oliver Sacks, "The 'Dark, Paradoxical Gift.'" The New York Review of Books April 11, 1991, p.7.

richness of her visual world by describing a brilliant outdoor scene, complete with animals, fields, rivers, mountains, and children dancing in a circle under a shining moon. In addition, Rachel asserts that she can see colors jump around and form dolls and flowers. Her greatest claim, however, is that, because of her blindness, she (and by implication also Menashe) can see "'from the inside'" (p.36).

The children's proficiency at seeing from the inside and their ability to create their own stories distinguish them from their peers and place them in a class of their own. At this early age, they are already "belle lettrists." They are authors, like Singer himself or like the God Singer sometimes imagines.⁵ The children even seem aware of their exalted status. Menashe tells Rachel that they must keep some of their most extravagant visions to themselves until they grow up because "'it is written in the Bible "For the Lord looketh on the heart" (p.37). The Lord sees from the inside, as our protagonists (and Singer) do.

Singer's identification with God and his eternal battle with Him is one of the main sources of his greatness as a writer.⁶ Regardless of his many disavowals and claims to

⁵Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yes . . ." Yiddish 6. 2-3 (Summer and Fall 1985): 164: "God was an eternal belle lettrist . . . like my brother and myself. . . ."

⁶Richard Burgin with Isaac Bashevis Singer, Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer (Garden City New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1985). Isaac says: "I feel a deep resentment against the Almighty. My religion goes hand in hand with a profound feeling of protest. . . . If I could I would picket

accept life with all its pains and disappointments, Singer, as judged from the fictional characters through whom he has waged his battle against the creator, is engaged in a effort to modify drastically God's creation as it now exists. Like all artists, Singer strives to free consciousness and creativity from the restrictions of nature and society. In frank competition with God, he intends to amend reality, to demolish all that which fetters action and thought.

Singer is not inclined toward renunciation of anything he desires. His adult heroes, these scintillating creatures who assert man's right to claim for himself everything he is capable of envisioning, do fail. But they are resurrected in some of Singer's stories for children, as we see in "Menashe and Rachel." The young protagonists of this story have already attained one of man's most persistent and hallowed fantasies. They have food and shelter without toil, and they have love. But they know that their situation is not a normal one in the real world. They still need a more congenial place, a more complete paradise. Once more, they create it in their own imaginations.

The paradise the children create is truly a perfect one. It has no serpent, but it has physical love. In fact, the fantasy of this paradise is elicited by physical love, by the children's first kiss. As in much of Singer's fiction, it is the female who takes the initiative. Rachel persuades Menashe

the Almighty with a sign 'Unfair to Life'" (pp.115-16).

to give her a kiss. To his protestation that this is not allowed and that God can see what they are doing, Rachel answers, "' . . . God looks into the heart. In my heart, I am already grown up and I am your wife'" (p.38). Thus, not satisfied with their situation, the children imaginatively leap into adulthood to extend their joys and privileges. After they kiss, Menashe's "heart was beating like a little hammer, and both their faces were hot" (p.38). When Menashe constructs his paradise, immediately after this experience, he moves the two of them imaginatively into a world completely their own. He places them on an island uninhabited by other human beings. There are only wild animals and fruit trees on this paradise. Menashe and Rachel take refuge there after saving themselves from a shipwreck, presumably the sole survivors. Their happiness is total for only a few seconds because soon Rachel asks: "'Alone on the island forever?'" (p.39).

It is difficult to believe, from the evidence of Singer's work and life, that Menashe wants anyone else, including his own children, on that island. We have seen that Singer's adult heroes show scant interest in becoming fathers. More precisely, like Isaac himself who would rather "not be anybody's uncle, brother, son, husband, father or grandfather,"⁷ they do not like family life, and like Asa Heshel, feel free to say so. However, they do like closeness

⁷Paul Kresh, The Magician of West 86th Street (New York: The Dial Press, 1979) p.126.

with women and believe that reproduction and the intrusion of other people are always detrimental to love--as it is in all the novels discussed above. Therefore, it is highly probable that Menashe did not want anyone else at all. In this story everything is designed to make the children truly a couple apart. They are both orphans and blind, and their compatibility as dreamers and seers provides an additional strong bond between the two of them. They seem like the perfect couple to achieve the type of relationship Singer's adult heroes have sought in vain. Procreation and raising children of their own are not yet an issue because of their youth. And in the future they can elude these duties, if they so desire, because there is no one else on the island to require or expect anything of them. But Rachel does not seem to have the same desires as Menashe in this respect. Menashe has no choice but to create a family of twelve children for them, and then to invent a sailboat that takes them to Israel.

The protagonists imaginatively restore themselves to society and go on to fulfill their duties as producers and socializers of children: in this case, as new Jewish citizens in a Jewish state. This does not seem like the realization of the dreams entertained by the Asa Heshels and Yasha Mazurs of Singer's adult fiction. Has this little story also failed as a means of attaining ideal love? Perhaps it has. Maybe poor Menashe has invented children he doesn't want in order not to hurt his beloved. Later, having constructed a world that does

not meet his requirements, Menashe, like other Singer heroes, will probably have no choice but to rush from lady to lady, or even try affairs with several women at the same time. Guilt will inevitably follow, and then he will lock himself in a cell, or vanish altogether. But there is also the possibility that the good relationship between Menashe and Rachel makes the idea of returning to society acceptable, even enjoyable. And the story creates a relationship that is non-existent in the adult fiction, with the sole exception of The Slave. The children have a partnership based on camaraderie, on equality, and on complete truthfulness with each other. They confront the outside world as a unit. They succeed in helping each other cope and grow, and they work together to embellish their circumstances with the power of their active imaginations. Under the imaginativeness and the youthful affection there is the ideal of transcendent love Singer refuses to forfeit.

Singer's tenacity in the pursuit of ideal love is remarkable. He continues to carry out his quest in the children's fiction with an energy and childlike enthusiasm which seem extraordinary in a man who was 62 when he started to write for children. Michael Kotzin has pointed out that "Singer's manner of perceiving and portraying the world corresponds to the child's way of perceiving it in several ways."⁸ One may add that this correspondence extends to his

⁸Michael C. Kotzin, "The Uses of Enchantment in Singer's Children's Stories" Yiddish 5 (1982-84): 13.

obstinate determination to achieve what he wants, to push against the boundaries of life to make it yield the ideal love he envisions.

Singer had a number of reasons for starting to write children's stories. One reason is most revealing of himself. "Our children, God bless them, don't read to discover their identity, as so many wiser adults pretend to do. Young as they are, fresh from the egg, they know exactly who they are and where they belong. . . . With an instinct no fashion-making can destroy, the child has become the guardian of those moral and religious values which the adults have rejected in the name of an ill-conceived notion of social progress."⁹ If Singer is basing his opinions on memories of his own childhood as presented in his memoirs, he may be remembering that he had a very clear sense of what he was and wanted. A successful escapee/survivor of what Alice Miller calls "poisonous pedagogy,"¹⁰ he was seeking his own way in the world, quietly

⁹Isaac Bashevis Singer, "I See the Child as a Last Refuge," New York Times Book Review, November 9, 1969, pp.1, 66.

¹⁰Alice Miller, Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child. (New York: New American Library, 1984). Miller believes that adults react defensively to their children's urge to develop their own potential and treat them with authoritarian harshness. This deprives children of their autonomy and ability to search for and find their own answers, and inculcates in them the notion that they are to blame for the harm that is being inflicted on them. In return for tolerating this treatment, children "are given the right to treat their own children in the same fashion" (p.143). Miller calls this type of behavior "poisonous pedagogy" and she claims that parents use it to maintain their autocratic, Godlike (God being the ultimate practitioner of this

evading what was being taught by his parents: "the wiser adults." But Singer's parents, not Singer, were actually the guardians of the "moral and religious values" which he was abandoning in order to protect and nurture his creative genius, and to preserve and foment what he was and what he wanted.

Singer's wants did not change very much as he grew older, and his children's stories, although paying lip-service to God, reverberate with the same intense desire to simply snatch as much as possible out of life. He wrote for children to explore new ways of meeting his own emotional, psychological and intellectual needs, to try out new magic tricks in his efforts both to conjure up a more pleasing reality and to attain a "temporary psychological equilibrium."¹¹ He wrote children's books for the same reason he was interested in folklore, because as he says: "folklore gives you wings, gives you a little cap that makes you invisible, gives you little

"educational" approach) position at all costs.

¹¹Bernard Paris, "The Tempest Shakespeare's Ideal Solution" Shakespeare's Personality ed. Norman Holland, Sidney Homan and Bernard Paris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) pp.206-225. Paris theorizes that Shakespeare had "strong vindictive impulses but even stronger taboos against those impulses, and a fear of the guilt and punishment to which he would be exposed if he acted them out. Paris shows that The Tempest offered a good solution for this predicament and that Prospero is able to take revenge on his foes by using his magic tempest, after which "he renounces his magic and forgives every-one" (p.223), thus satisfying his vindictive impulses without sacrificing his innocence.

boots so that you can walk seven miles in a second."¹² In other words, folklore is imagination given free rein, it is a triumph over the laws of nature and the ways of society, it is what man intuits (and wishes) regarding his potential. Writing for children, particularly after he was forced reluctantly to concede victory to reality in the fiction for adults, was Singer's way of beginning afresh in a genre in which it is completely legitimate to resort to magic.

We saw how the concerns of the fiction for adults emerge in "Menashe and Rachel." Despite the fact that God, procreation, and even Israel are politely mentioned, the story is a condemnation of the ways things are, and its beauty and excitement derive from its undercurrent of rebellion rather than from the feeble endorsements of the status quo. This story shows how very willing Singer is to distort and deny reality in order to create the paradise of male/female mutuality he cannot desist pursuing.

Shosha: "Menashe and Rachel" Revisited.

Singer was willing to pursue his adult goals in children's fiction and, in the novel Shosha,¹³ he experiments with adult regression to his childhood world. We have seen how

¹²Paul Kresh, The Magician of West 86th Street (New York: The Dial Press, 1979) p. 13.

¹³Isaac Bashevis Singer, Shosha (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1978). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

Yasha Mazur and Herman Broder eluded adult responsibilities and showed their predilection for womb-like enclosures in which to recover the mother and self-sufficiency as well as to hide from their marital and reproductive duties. In Shosha, Singer continues his persistent efforts to modify reality by writing a fairy tale for adults. Aaron Greidinger, the protagonist of Shosha, is an adult who, after getting involved in the now familiar simultaneous love affairs with several women, seeks to attain his love (and developmental) objectives through marriage to a childlike bride. In his endeavor, Aaron Greidinger has the assistance of an entire cast of characters who, unrealistically, respond to his desires by behaving like fairy godparents. Aaron, protagonist and narrator of the novel, courts and marries Shosha in a fictional world threatened by the reality of Nazism. But the novel is pervaded by the presence of Morris Feitelzohn, a kind of fairy godfather who promotes the idea that "the day will come when all truth will be recognized as arbitrary definitions, all values as rules of a game" (p.249). As if to conform to Feitelzohn's ideas, and in defiance of a background which proscribed playing, Singer "plays games" with his personal history, with gender, and with time, as well as continues his experimentation with the relationship between the sexes.

As Ruth Wisse has pointed out, Shosha is "a semi-autobiographical novel of pre-war Poland, [in which] the

author rewrites his life."¹⁴ The rewriting, however, is only partial and pertains mainly to the author's adult years. Singer's childhood is not revised. Instead, the author uses this novel to combine in one book many of the complaints about his background and parents that are scattered through the memoirs and to indicate how and why he had to select a more conducive atmosphere for his development.

Aaron's gripes are familiar to the student of Singer's life. Aaron's father is a rabbi in a poor community and "the people who paid [his] father his weekly remuneration were watchful, always ready to find some sign of misconduct in his children" (p.16). The salary is pitifully low for Aaron "had stopped going to cheder because [his] father could not afford the tuition" (p.14). At the beginning of World War I, "many wealthy housewives had stocked their larders with flour, rice, beans, and groats, but [Aaron's] mother had been busy reading morality books. Besides, we had no money" (p.17). Aaron's recounts that he and his younger brother Moishe had no toys and says:

From the time I can first remember, I heard [my father] repeat the phrase 'it is forbidden.' Everything I wanted to do was a transgression. I was not allowed to draw or paint a person--that violated the Second Commandment. I couldn't say a word against another boy--that was slander. I couldn't laugh at anyone--that was mockery. I couldn't make up a story--that represented a lie. (p10)

¹⁴Ruth R. Wisse, "Singer's Paradoxical Progress," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 157.

Of course, this makes it clear that Singer's entire life was an expression of dissent against his background. He was first interested in drawing (and his brother Joshua in painting), and later made his living by the "telling of lies." The process began early and, as the novel shows how Shosha was connected with the hero's first rebellion against the father's prohibitions, it also begins to acquire its fairy tale qualities.

Shosha's home is a palace of worldly pleasure compared to Aaron's. The place always smells of stews, roasts and desserts, the walls are covered with pictures, there are painted and gold-rimmed plates in the kitchen, pretty bedspreads in the bedrooms, and embroidered cushions on the sofa. Best of all, the children have a crate filled with dolls, balls, colored pencils, and paints. In this home, the mother, Bashele, always gives the children something to eat and drink, and lets them play.

Aaron's parents disapprove of Bashele and suspect she doesn't keep a kosher household. At Bashele's Isaac/Aaron makes up for the deprivations of his own home. He "passed through the dark hall that led from [his] apartment to Bashele's as often as [he] could" (p.8) to be able to behave as a normal child. The dark hall is a symbol of the vague awareness of infraction. Singer's adult heroes show a pattern of enjoying living with adoring mothers-in-law in homes with absent fathers-in-law. Yasha stays with Elzbieta while having

the affair with her daughter Magda, Herman does likewise with Shifrah Puah and Masha, and Aaron with Bashele and Shosha. It is a species of incest at one remove. A way of having a pampering and nurturing mother through their daughters.

At her home, Beshele does preside as a very nurturing mother and the children play as though they were siblings. Aaron and Shosha play with the "collection of human and animal figurines, shiny buttons, gaudy ribbons" (p.12) and also engage in role-playing. The most important activity, however, is (as it is in "Menashe and Rachel") storytelling. Aaron/Isaac retells stories he has heard, but he also tells Shosha things that he did not dare speak of to anyone else, and he feels that he can describe to her all his fantasies and daydreams. He tells her that he: "was familiar with the Cabala and knew expressions so sacred they could draw wine from the wall, create live pigeons, and let [him] fly to Madagascar" (p.12), and he promises her that when he sits "on Solomon's throne, [he will] take her for a wife the other wives and concubines [will] bow before her with their faces to the earth" (p.15). Shosha listens entranced, and even her mother, Bashele, "would sit with [them] and listen to [his] chatter" (p.12).

Shosha is Aaron's first inspiration and audience as well as the Eve that helps him begin the life of infraction necessary for the development of his genius. She is a fictionalized version of the companion, Shosha, Singer chooses

in his memoir "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw" when he fantasizes running away in search of secular knowledge. Singer's choosing to rewrite his life by allowing Aaron to marry his childhood companion is a tribute to her importance as living muse and reveals what he considers to have been crucial to the development of his talents.

After Aaron marries Shosha, Feitelzohn says to him, "I like her. With her at your side, your talent will grow" (p.229). Indeed, Shosha is invaluable because she eagerly listens to Aaron's fantasies. "Fantasy is an inextricable part of reality . . . [and it] provides both escape and illumination,"¹⁵ but it is considered infantile by many adults. Shosha's receptivity to his imaginings is the reason why Aaron was never able to forget her, and also the origin of the different type of passion he feels for her: "I listened to my desire and it struck me that if metal could feel, my feeling was that of a needle drawn to a magnet" (p.225).

Aaron's recurrent dreams show that he was always aware of Shosha's magnetism and that he detected early what Feitelzohn verbalizes regarding her importance as his muse:

But I never forgot Shosha I dreamed of her at night. In my dreams she was both dead and alive. I played with her in a garden which was also a cemetery. Dead girls joined us there wearing garments that were ornate shrouds. They danced in circles and sang songs. They swung, skated, occasionally hovered in the air. I strolled with

¹⁵Andrew Gordon, "Science-Fiction and Fantasy Film Criticism: The Case of Lucas and Spielberg," Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 2.2 (Summer 1989): 85.

Shosha in a forest of gigantic trees that touched the sky. The birds there were different from any I knew. They were as big as eagles, as colorful as parrots. They spoke Yiddish. From the thickets surrounding the garden, beasts with human faces showed themselves. Shosha was at home in this garden, and instead of my pointing out and explaining to her as I had done in the past, she revealed to me things I hadn't known and whispered secrets in my ear. (p.20)

Shosha is the goddess of literature. Aaron believes that "the aim of literature [is] to prevent time from vanishing" (p.21), and this is what Shosha does. She dwells in a territory which is both Garden of Eden and cemetery, origin and end, a realm where life and death are one. Sarah Blacher Cohen says that Shosha's "arrested development makes possible the arrest of time,"¹⁶ and Leon Wieseltier comments that, with Shosha, Greidinger "has come upon a way . . . to thwart time."¹⁷ What Shosha does is make time a continuum, and she transforms herself and Aaron into time travellers who can access time zones at will. For Shosha, the past is as alive as the present: she imagines that Krochmalna Street is the same as twenty years before, when they were children, and that all the dead people are still alive.

In Aaron's dream, in the combination of cemetery and garden, he and Shosha have the company of dead girls (one notices the absence of male competition) whose shrouds are

¹⁶Sarah Blacher Cohen, "From Hens to Roosters" Recovering the Canon ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) p. 84.

¹⁷Leon Wieseltier, "The Revenge of I. B. Singer," New York Review of Books, December 7, 1978, p. 6.

ornate. Their death garments are embellished as Jewish shrouds can never be, but most importantly, as nothing could be in Aaron's (and Singer's) home. This is a most unusual cemetery, for the girls dance, sing and play games; it a place that must have seemed irresistibly attractive to a child whose only permitted game was with dreidels, once a year, at Hanukkah. I have likened Singer's work to a top, and I find it interesting that the girls' play is dreidel-like (like so many children's games); a dancing in circles accompanied by their singing which could be imaginatively heard as resembling the melody of a spinning top. When the girls occasionally hover in the air, they are like Yasha trying to fly over humanity so as to dominate it, like Herman trying to flee so as to get his way (another type of dominance), and like Jacob and Wanda/Sarah actually being able to soar above the quotidian in their unusual love. These girls are like the fictional works of the writer/magician. They turn the cemetery into a playground, just as Singer transformed his game-proscribing Hasidic legacy into an eternal Hanukkah with the magic of his art.

The paradise of literature is like this cemetery (which is rapidly becoming a tropical garden and echoes Menashe's and Rachel's island), in that everything is sky-reaching, like the gigantic trees. The birds are like the astonishing macaws of the South American jungles: huge, brilliantly colored, and capable of imitating human language. In this paradise, however, they do not just imitate; they speak Yiddish. They

are the representatives of Aaron's (and Singer's) literary creativity: large, winged, multicolored creatures who speak a language which, like the Shosha of the dream, is both dead and alive; a language which is, in other words, time resistant.

Like Menashe and Rachel's island, this paradise has no serpent, but Evil is present in the form of beasts which possess human faces. Aaron's defense against such human peril is not his intellect, religious erudition, and self-acquired secular education, but Shosha. Though considered "a little fool" by everyone and told that there was no place for her in school, she is Aaron's guide, his mentor, the one who protects and nurtures his lively literary imagination.

If Shosha is a literary muse and deity, Dr. Feitelzohn is a mischievous literary genie. While Shosha, in reality as well as in dreams, gives Aaron access to playfulness and creativity, Feitelzohn provides the theoretical basis on which to depart from the childhood background in which "everything [Aaron] wanted to do was a transgression" (p.10). Dr. Feitelzohn talks about being possessed by a dybbuk who tells him "to found an institute of hedonism," and he in fact believes that life is such a place and that "all people are hedonists, yes. From cradle to grave, man thinks only of pleasure. What do the pious want? Pleasure in the other world. . . . the pursuit of pleasure is man's only goal. If he fails here, he must fail in everything else" (p.40). This explanation must have helped Aaron exorcise some of the guilt

felt at betraying his pious father's expectations since it made the rabbi's motives no different from his. In his "soul expeditions," Feitelzohn also promoted the theory that "jealousy was about to vanish from human love and sex and be supplemented by a wish to share libidinous enjoyment with others" (p.98), thus legitimizing and facilitating his and Aaron's propensity to promiscuity. But perhaps the most important thing about Dr. Feitelzohn is that "severe critic that he was, he had detected talent in [Aaron]" (p.23).

Feitelzohn's belief in Aaron's creative potential is important, but initially Aaron seems to be heeding mainly the doctor's notions regarding sex and the system of belief based on Veihinger's thinking and his philosophy of "as if." In addition to recognizing all truth as arbitrary and seeing all values as rules of a game, Feitelzohn's philosophy demands the creation of "play-temples" where people would go to act out their thoughts and emotions. "Those who hadn't yet decided what kind of games they preferred would participate in soul expeditions with him or with someone of his caliber to discover what would amuse and inspire them most" (p.249).

Soul Expeditions was the original Yiddish title of what became Shosha in translation. This is an apt transition since Aaron's soul expeditions precede his relationship with Shosha and lead to his discovery that regressing to her is what would please and "inspire him most." In perfect adherence to

Singer's own life and in keeping with the tradition established with other protagonists in his novels, Aaron's soul expeditions are sexual and romantic entanglements with several women at once.

Once again we are treated to the gallery of women who are, as Sarah Blacher Cohen accurately notes, "only thinly disguised from their real-life counterparts in Singer's memoir" (pp.81-81). There is the Communist Dora Stolnitz, the older married woman in love with literature Celia Chentshiner, the Polish servant Tekla, and the Russian-born American actress Betty Slonim. The sole significant difference between Aaron's affairs and those of other Singer protagonists is that, in accordance with the magic of Feitelzohn's theories, there is no jealousy or animosity between rivals, and most of the characters behave magnanimously toward one another.

Thus they all become fairy godparents of love. Feitelzohn encourages Aaron in the affair with Feitelzohn's mistress Celia, while her husband Haiml happily consents to it, and Sam Dreiman promises to help his mistress Betty Slonim in her attempts to marry Aaron. Humor and a sort of playfulness are also evident. A game-like moment takes place on Aaron's and Shosha's wedding day. Tekla, grimacing a bit but without complaining, ushers in Dora who comes with congratulations and a bouquet of flowers. When after a few minutes Betty Slonim also appears with flowers in her hands, Tekla's "eyes sparkled with laughter, and "an urge to laugh come[s] over

[Aaron]" (p.211). Though Dora and Betty "seemed to fence momentarily with the tips of their cigarettes," there is no real indignation and the entire scene is only "like the remnant of some heathen rite" (p.212). Such atavism appears unsuited to the imagination-ruled sophisticated world of the novel. Instead, as symbolized by the flowers (an unusual gift from female to male) the women tolerantly concentrate on displaying their good desires rather than their disappointment. They behave like reluctant fairy godmothers.

Strictly speaking, the women had no reason to be jealous of one another since they have all been defeated by Shosha. But neither do they show animosity toward the young bride. Celia offers to take the newlyweds into her apartment and Tekla eventually turns up in Shosha's home asking for refuge. Only Betty is unwilling to be kind to Shosha and twice proposes to take Aaron back to America without his bride. This greater rivalry between Betty and Shosha is understandable because they share an important trait in common. Like Yasha Mazur's assistant, Magda, who was thin and flat chested, Betty and Shosha are both androgynous beings.

Betty is extremely thin, has "an Adam's apple like a boy's, and wears her hair *à la garçon*" (p.35). To her statement that maybe she is not a woman, her lover Sam responds with vehement protestations: "you are one hundred percent a woman--no, not one hundred percent but a thousand! I have had many women in my life, but what she is--" (p.38).

But as Aaron discovers when she sees her rehearsing her double role as maiden and male musician/dybbuk, "she was better as the musician than as the girl. The girl's voice sounded half masculine" (p.53). Feitelzohn observes that Betty is the only pessimistic woman he has ever met and that "pessimism is usually a male trait" (p.38). Shosha has female grace and softness; she is "a blond girl, blue eyed, with a short nose, [and] thin lips" (p.98). But she is also unusually slender, has very small breasts and, being undeveloped and childlike, cannot have children. The two women who most attract Aaron are of borderline gender, and the one he marries is both androgynous and a child. Unlike Betty, who cries "'Keep away from me! I'm cursed, cursed'" (p.75), Shosha has never had "the curse." She is never "unclean" because she does not menstruate. If behind the Singer hero's womanizing lies the Jewish dread of menstruation and a profound mistrust of women, Shosha is exempt from this because she does not have any of woman's faults. Aaron says: "'she [Shosha] is the only woman I can trust'" (p.262). And indeed, with Shosha Singer has even contrived an innovative way in which to help his protagonist, who says that he doesn't "want children with anyone" (p.44), elude the shackles of parenthood: have him marry a woman who cannot bear children.

Though it could be argued that in marrying Shosha Aaron is taking on a sort of parental role, and Aaron on their wedding trip allows the conductor to believe that Shosha is

his daughter (p.225), the situation is more complex than that. To a great extent, Aaron has merely recovered his childhood playmate so that they can return together to their enchanted past. For as Feitelzohn says, Aaron has "been a little boy and . . . will remain one for the rest of [his] life" (p.140). In this novel, Singer revises "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw," and is finally able to take Shosha along in his journey of development and evasion.

However, Singer questions the situation, and Aaron wonders whether he is in love or under "the power of retrogression" (p.99). For if Shosha "in her own fashion . . . denie[s] death" [p.98], it follows that she also denies time, change, and growth. Betty says to Aaron about Shosha: "Instead of your raising her up, she'll drag you to her level" (p.89).

Perhaps Aaron feared that Betty was right. After deciding to marry Shosha instead of Betty, he notes that he is not "elated, as those in love usually are" (p.180). And, on his wedding night, after some touchingly childish behavior on Shosha's part, Aaron discovers that "the tremendous urge for Shosha that had seized [him] on the train had dissipated" (p.228). He fears impotence but the marriage is eventually consummated:

I fell asleep and dreamed. Someone shrieked wildly. Animals with long teats dragged me, tore chunks from me with fang and claw. I was wandering through a cellar that was also a slaughterhouse and a cemetery strewn with unburied corpses. I awoke excited. I grabbed Shosha, and before she could

even wake up, I mounted her. She choked and resisted. A stream of hot blood burned my thigh. I tried to pacify her, but she broke out in a wail.
(p.228)

It is a freakish and repulsive dream, as if of fright at the possibility of Shosha being the freak many think she is. It begins with someone shrieking wildly, just as Shosha will when so violently approached, but also as Aaron himself must have had to when his flesh was being torn "with fang and claw." The horrible animals which "drag" him, which bring him down to their own level of animality, are unequivocally female; their long teats allowing no room for dubiousness. They lower him into the abyss of nature and of the femaleness which represents nature and carries out its repetitious and gory cycle of life and death. These weird creatures tear apart the body which had responded to the sexual allure of the child-bride on the train. This is the body of a man who says: "I had never freed myself from a notion inherited from generations: the body is a vessel of shame and disgrace, dust in life and worse in death" (p.98). Now the body is reaping what the mind thinks the body deserves: slow and painful destruction meted out by female nature.

In this dream, instead of a combination cemetery/garden, there is a cemetery/slaughterhouse. A cemetery is not in itself an awful place since it can, as in Aaron's recurrent dream about Shosha, be transformed into a garden by the creative powers of the imagination. A slaughterhouse is a different matter. It exists in the darkest cellar of the mind

and it is a place in which corpses are piled up unburied. The slaughterhouse is the obverse of the "institute of pure hedonism" Feitelzohn would want life to be, and it is also its result. The slaughterhouse is life ruled by wasteful nature, which relishes destruction and bloodshed and responds to it with renewed fertility.

Aaron's dream is a sort of self-castigation for his intensely sexual response to his child-like bride. Like all acts of atonement, it is liberating; it cleanses him and (much like a Catholic confession) frees him to act on his still sinful, but temporarily legitimized and intensified, impulses. But the dream is also a descent, a regression which echoes Aaron's return to childhood through Shosha. It is an adolescent dream and it makes Aaron behave with the sexual cruelty of the unexperienced young (he is a rather sophisticated lover much valued by his other four women). First, though I believe the dream is a form of expiation, it is still an act of imaginative cruelty for Aaron to be sexually excited after any type of unpleasantness, let alone after the ugliness his unconscious has just vomited. Betty had prophesied this ruthlessness when she said to Aaron: "You looked at that stunted girl today with the eyes of a tomcat looking at a canary" (p.92). What is happening is understandable, but very unflattering to the delicate and translucent Shosha. But of course, the bride's attributes (her frailty and innocence), and Aaron's regression to an earlier

sexual and developmental stage make cruelty indispensable for the consummation of the marriage.

The sadism is obvious in the hyperbolic nature of the scene. The protagonist/narrator cannot just inform the reader of his violent act, but he also has to do so in language which screams for close attention. Aaron does not embrace his bride, he "grabs" her. To insure the expediency he needs in his regressed adolescent mode, Aaron does not wait for Shosha to wake up, thus turning his first sexual experience with her into a rape. His gloating (and profound insecurity) is visible in the word "even": "before she could even wake up" (my emphasis). Then he "mounts" her, as if she were one of the female animals in the dream. Shosha's anguish is clear in her resistance and approaches agony when she "chokes" on the horror of awakening to such unexpected aggression. One wonders what she must have felt upon being so heartlessly penetrated by the prince charming she had dreamt of all of her life. The stream of hot blood burns Aaron's thigh as it should his conscience. He has momentarily turned his wedding chamber into a replica of the dreaded slaughterhouse. Shosha's wailing

impresses upon him the barbarity of his act¹⁸ and "in [his] distress [he] prayed to God to protect her" (p.228).

God apparently protects both of them since Aaron's fears of having married a freak prove unfounded and, instead, his union with Shosha has the results adumbrated in his garden/cemetery dream. It is on the third day of their honeymoon that Feitelzohn makes his pronouncement about Shosha being an aid to the growth of Aaron's talents, and it is also that day that he tells him about having found him a good-paying job. Gradually, Aaron "ceased being ashamed of Shosha. She dressed better, she appeared taller, [Aaron] took her to Celia's, and both Celia and Haiml were enchanted by her simplicity, her honesty, her naiveté. . . . She spoke in a childish fashion, but not stupidly" (p.241).

In addition, Shosha "quite often . . . spoke of things [Aaron] cared about" (p.240), and she continues to listen to him with affectionate curiosity. His play for Betty had failed miserably but the biography he writes after marrying Shosha succeeds. Aaron discusses his ideas for the biography with her. He "began to tell her things [he] hadn't yet written. [He] conducted a literary experiment with her--let [his]

¹⁸In his interview with Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.18, Singer says: "When people have extreme power over other people, it's a terrible thing. I always pray to God (and I do pray because I am in my way a religious man), don't give me any power over any human beings." Aaron misuses his power over Shosha and prays to God to protect her against his (Aaron's) heartlessness

tongue wag freely and say whatever came to [his] lips. Aaron does not limit himself to brainstorming for the biography, but also spins off fantasies that show him to be as outrageous in his imaginings and ambitions as Yasha Mazur:

I had constructed an airplane of a material whose atoms so densely compressed, one square centimeter weighed thousands of tons. It flew at a speed of a million miles a minute. It could pierce mountains, bore through the earth, reached to the farthest planets. It contained a clairvoyant telephone that tuned me in to the thoughts and plans of every human being on earth. I became so mighty I rendered all wars obsolete. When the Bolsheviks, Nazis, anti-Semites, swindlers, thieves, and rapists heard of my powers, they promptly surrendered. I instituted a world order based on Dr. Feitelzohn's philosophy of play. In my airplane I kept a harem of eighteen wives, but the queen and sovereign would be no other than Shosha herself. (p.240)

Yasha's tightrope and flying fantasies, however, relied on skills he theoretically had. They were slightly exaggerated, but they were appropriate dreams for a magician since, although difficult, they were still within the realm of the attainable. They came close to being magnified plans. Aaron's "reveries of triumph over Hitler and Stalin" read more like the fantasies of someone who, having regressed to the omnipotent stage of development, is willing to believe in his ability to turn hallucination into object.

The airplane is not constructed to minimize weight but, on the contrary, in true defiance of any logical consideration, it is to be a masterpiece of compression, heedless of any scientific constraint. For here we are not dealing with Yasha's magic as illusion-fueled anticipation of

science but with the raw egotism of a child. The prodigious density is necessary because this is to be flying machine and penetrator all at once: a thing to represent and set aloft the sky-aspiring imagination, but also to pierce the earth. Of what use this piercing is, is not immediately clear. It could be that the penetration of the planet is analogous to the ability to invade all human minds (to pierce with the eye and ear of the mind) by means of the clairvoyant telephone, and equally necessary for the vanquishing of all those enemies of mankind and for the permanent elimination of war. But soon it is obvious that this is another example of Singer's tendency "to align the human will in general with the sexual will."¹⁹ The plane has to be a perforator of awesome density to replicate (and satisfy) Aaron's sexual grandiosity, as well as the psychological "dense-ness" which makes such grandiosity possible. The only harem Aaron needs (and really wants?) is the one constituted by the separate facets of the creatively helpful and gratifying Shosha.

And indeed, Shosha is not just muse and creative-writing workshop leader. She is also a very pleasing domestic companion, and has become a social asset. Aaron reflects that "because [he] couldn't be with Shosha all the time, coming home to her was always a wonder to [him]. She and Bashele had food ready for [him] to eat before [he] lay down" (p.237).

¹⁹Baruch Hochman, "I. B. Singer's Vision of Good and Evil" in Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer Ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969) p.129.

Shosha also wears "shoes with high heels and flesh-colored stockings not only when she went visiting but also at home" (p.238), has new nightgowns with lace, and occasionally changes her hairdo. The Chentshiners believe Shosha resembles their little deceased daughter and Haiml "played with the idea that the soul of their little girl might have transmigrated into Shosha" (p.242). Shosha's greatest success, however, is to allow herself to be hypnotized by one of the Chentshiner's friends, and to declare the hypnotist not a person, but someone from the sky. After which Haiml exclaims: "Tsutsik, this is a memorable evening for me. I won't forget this evening as long as I live!" (p.242).

The marriage is successful because Aaron is running it to suit his requirements and Shosha, just as she listens to ravings Aaron would never utter in the presence of any "grown" woman, has accepted most of his terms. Aaron refuses to behave like "a husband in the accepted sense of the word" (p.238) and, though Shosha assumes some of the duties of a wife, she does not make the usual marital demands--except when it comes to reproduction. Shosha wants to have a baby. Twice (pp.233, and 247) she asks Aaron and both times he tells her that he does not want any children. Since Shosha is probably incapable of bearing children (she has never had a menstrual period), her desires alone are not enough to threaten the relationship. Aaron has no difficulty preserving the sort of "Menashe and Rachel" situation (two children growing together with the help

but not the interference of the adult world) which is what he deliberately chose after indulging for a while in the life of amicable sexual promiscuity encouraged by Feitelzohn and legitimized by Feitelzohn's philosophy.

When Betty, worrying about survival in a world threatened by Hitler, wants to know why Aaron is ready to give up his life for Shosha, Aaron responds that he "can't kill a child" (p.261), and when she counters that he never displayed such consideration for other women he again places Shosha in childhood by answering "those were adults" (p.262). Aaron believes himself to be also an adult, and there is no doubt he is seen as such by others too. But his choice of Shosha as a bride is a regression to the child-like in himself. Which is to say that it is, at times, also a return to the God-competing impulses which find expression in omnipotent fantasies.

Just as Menashe's and Rachel's imaginative leap into adulthood is indispensable, so too is Aaron's return to childhood, since it allows him to develop his artistic potential and to try, without inhibitions, new notions and new genres. Singer/Aaron is not afraid of the messages contained in "that primal stuff that [many adults] may try to turn away from but that is inescapably there . . . ignored, unspoken, repressed, unconscious, but nonetheless there, present."²⁰

²⁰John Cech, "Sendak's Mythic Childhood, Children's Literature 10 (1982): 179.

Thus the fantasies become more outrageous and he goes beyond defeating Hitler and Stalin and making wars obsolete; he becomes simply almighty.

Feuerbach says that "Omnipotence does nothing more than accomplish the will of the feelings."²¹ In response to Shosha's desire to have her dead sister Yppe back, Aaron expresses his feelings for her and for himself by expanding his omnipotence. He goes from fighting the Nazis and the Communists to actually doing away with death. He promises to bring Yppe back to life, and to attain this he develops a new fantasy/theory of time.

I elaborated to Shosha the theory that world history was a book man could read only forward. He could never turn the pages of this world book backward. But everything that ever been still existed. Yppe lived somewhere. The hens, geese, and ducks the butchers in Yanash's Court slaughtered each day still lived, clucked quacked, and crowed on the other pages of the book. (p.241)

This is Aaron's incursion into science fiction, the most suitable literary genre for the expression of humanity's most cherished, God-aspiring, and science-inspiring wishes. Shosha "goes from being an anachronism to being modern by simply standing still,"²² and Aaron, who "was an anachronism in every way and didn't know it" (p.8), takes a position at the vanguard of literature by "regressing" to her. Shosha wanted

²¹Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, Trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) p.125.

²²Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Orphaned Fictions" in Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986) p.227.

her dead sister back, thus providing Aaron with the perfect opportunity to show her his imaginative might.

The most interesting aspect of Aaron's fantasy is that, though it is a time-defeating one, it is not at all futuristic. Neither Shosha nor Aaron (as though aware of the paradoxical effect of their regressed state) seems to have the slightest interest in transporting themselves to a more advanced, and presumably safer, future. Instead, not yet completely content with the present, they still strive to return to the childhood their union was meant to honor and recapture. One notices also that the only human being that is recovered in this fantasy is the one Shosha specifically asks for (echoing Rachel request for children). The other revived creatures are all animals which have fallen to the butchers' knife. It is Singer's vegetarian crusade against the killing of animals for sacrificial purposes and for food. It is a fantasy/vision of a world so benevolent that one can concentrate on saving animals because human beings are no longer imperilled by their own propensity to kill one another. But it is also the opposite: the foreshadowing of a return to a barbaric past in which the only way to exorcise the evil within was by projecting it on other creatures one was eager to victimize; a poignant intimation of the impending scape-goating slaughter of innocent people by Hitler.²³ Finally,

²³I suspect that Singer's vegetarianism had its roots, not so much in the killing of animals for food, but in doing so for ritual (religious) reasons. It would be interesting to

the world of children and resurrected animals Aaron is conjuring up is a bit like the Paradise to which Menashe and Rachel imaginatively transported themselves, and also like the original Garden of Eden where all species lived in perpetual harmony, without death, before the end of innocence and child-likeness.

Aaron/Singer is not only incapable of achieving his science-fiction revision of reality, but even fails to keep his muse alive. Shosha dies, apparently from lack of desire to continue living, on the second day of walking away from Warsaw. All the other Jewish characters in the novel also perish and the only survivors are Aaron and Haiml.

Once, referring to Celia's and Haiml's dead daughter, Feitelzohn argued that "the child's death contained a measure of divine logic, since Celia already had a child--Haiml" (p.25). Aaron is called Tsutsik throughout the novel, because, as Celia says, "He writes like a grown-up but he is still a child" (p.28). Two children survive--Aaron and Haiml--to wrap up the story, and to enact the reiteration of Feitelzohn's philosophy of play and sharing and of Aaron's theory of time because this is not "a stunted novel about stunted lives,"²⁴ but an embracing of the imaginative through a purposeful return to child-likeness.

trace the association of sacrificial animals and Jews in his works.

²⁴Leon Wieseltier, "The Revenge of Isaac Bashevis Singer," New York Review of Books, December 7, 1978, p.6.

The white-bearded, child-like Haiml takes up both Feitelzohn's and Aaron's banners, while Aaron listens. He says to Aaron: "I once heard you say--or quote someone--that time is a book whose pages you can turn forward, not back . . . Tsutsik, I seem to be able to make peace with everything but death. How can it be that all the generations are dead and only we schlemiels are allegedly living?" (p.277). He has taken up Aaron's (and Singer's) cause, just as he has also appropriated the parts of it that Singer had temporarily assigned to Feitelzohn. He calls God "the dictator on high, the celestial Stalin" (p.273), agrees with Feitelzohn's dictum that "true religion . . . was not to serve God but to spite Him" (p.279), and he makes the last pronouncement about a new man who will evolve "with new instincts--those of sharing" (p.284). In an atmosphere of nostalgic reminiscence, with Haiml's new wife, Genia, serving as nurturing mother figure, the two children reach the end of the line--of the novel--without having given up a single one of Singer's and Aaron's fantasies. Haiml has the last word when he answers his wife's question by saying: "We are waiting for an answer" (p.186). He and Aaron "assume a typical position for Singer characters: they are contemplating the problem of suffering in life and, against all odds,"²⁵ are still expecting answers because

²⁵Thomas P. Riggio, "The Symbols of Faith: Isaac Bashevis Singer's Children's Books" in Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. David Neal Miller (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) p.137.

they are obstinately clinging to the hopes and wishes of the child-hearted. The world they envision is one in which Shosha would have been happy to survive because it is based on "the implicit belief that man is capable of fulfilling the universal void with some positive meaning."²⁶

There is one more survivor in the novel, the peasant girl Tekla. She is the only non-Jewish character in the narrative, and we recall the humor with which she responded to the incidents of Aaron's wedding day. Haiml reports that Tekla, who was working as a maid for him and Celia, "ran errands for [them]. She risked her life. She had to go back to her village because her father died" (p.279). Tekla became the Chentshiner's maid (with Aaron's help) after she was forced to abandon her previous job to run away from her fiancé, Bolek, who is threatening violence to get her to marry him. "He has a whole gang of thugs who served in the army and came back with revolvers and bayonets . . . He stank of vodka and he talked like a roughneck. I have grown unused to that kind of coarseness" (p.268).

Tekla, like Yadviga in Enemies, is a Polish peasant who loves the Jews and prefers them to her own less refined and less compassionate people. Though not child-like in the manner of Shosha, Aaron and Haiml, she is perhaps a sort of embryo of the new gentile who could help make a Feitelzohn type of world

²⁶Dinah Pladott, "Casanova or Schlemiel? The Don Juan Archetype in I. B. Singer's Fiction," Yiddish 6. 2-3 (Summer and Fall 1985): 70.

possible. She rejects the cruel aspects of her own group embodied in the war-brutalized Bolek. Revolvers and bayonets don't make her submit but rather make her run in search of people who have proven kinder and gentler even if they are not members of her own group. Rather than interpret her sexual affair with Aaron as an exploitation (which it was) or a betrayal, she attributes her own uplifting and higher refinement to this relationship and continues to regard Aaron as a friend and protector (which he is). It is not merely a matter of her fearing the fiancé's violence, but of decrying his drunken roughness. As Feitelzohn would have wanted it, Tekla chooses to improve herself through her connection with Aaron. She probably accepts the sexual exploitation without complaints out of her indoctrinated peasant passivity, but her subsequent behavior argues in favor of her simply being the type of person who habitually extracts improvement from whatever she gets involved in. Her running errands, at the risk of her life, for those who extended kindness to her, and with whose greater gentleness she herself identified, shows her to be a very good subject for the type of world Feitelzohn desired.

Placing "Menashe and Rachel" and "Shosha" side by side, and recollecting Shosha's participation in "A Hanukkah Eve in Warsaw" makes it possible for one to imagine Yasha Mazur stealthily abandoning his brick-cell to blend once more with his creator, to try again, this time with the magic of

children and child-like creatures rather than with the skills of an aging magician whose imagination refused to sober up into adult acceptance of human limitation.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Human beings are pleasure oriented, and intellectuals and artists who recognize and honor this are the best hope of mankind. Making good ideas and good art not just accessible to the masses but actually nearly impossible for them to resist is courageous and loving. This, Isaac Bashevis Singer did. The novels that can today captivate both scholars and shopkeepers will be read with similar entrancement by future generations and will promote and enhance the enlightened and aesthetic communication between groups and between ages which is essential for the happy survival of humanity.

Singer's initial aims were perhaps not as ponderous as the effects I attribute to his seductive fiction. The surreptitious young man of his memoirs used language and fantasy almost as emergency measures. They were the only tools available for his individual self-exploration, assertion, and development. But, having found literature satisfactory to his growth objectives, Singer went on to make it the vehicle for the pursuit of his supremely ambitious quest for a benevolent God and for an idealistic relationship between men and women. In novels and stories which make the quest its own reward, the search for God becomes open rivalry with the creator and the

pursuit of love goes full-circle from childhood to childlikeness.

Singer's adversarial relationship with God is the consequence of the closed, religious hierarchy frequently emphasized by his father. It was a situation which precluded ascent and as such it precipitated the fantasies of flight which so abound in Singer's work and which characterize him and so many of his protagonists. Yasha Mazur is the main embodiment of Singer's competition with God and he enacts the dangers inherent in such an endeavor by his need to subject himself to complete enclosure, the opposite of flight. But the flight/enclosure dichotomy and Yasha's competition with God also have oedipal implications. Singer found it difficult to react angrily against his father and, though he regarded Joshua as a father, he chose--as shown in "Growing Up"--introjection of his accomplished brother over competition with him. God was the only father figure against whom Singer could rebel, and thus He was the only father from whom he could really fear castration. However, as Singer's selection of orphanhood as his preferred family-romance indicates, Singer was so reluctant to confront his oedipal conflicts conventionally that he was determined to have no progenitors at all. To satisfy Singer's and Yasha's own needs, Yasha Mazur stops competing with God and becomes the Lord (just as Singer had become his older brother in "Growing Up"). Naturally, as Yasha takes on God's prerogatives by attempting to be his own

engenderer, he is also forced to adopt God's punishing (castrating) functions by imprisoning himself in the brick cell.

Interestingly, Singer never had to fear permanent confinement because, as a surreptitious listener and observer (a sort of supernatural creature, a little ghost) in his parent's home, he was an expert at invalidating walls and closed rooms. He learned to regard walls, doors, and restrictions of all sorts as porous. He had absolute confidence in his ability to move across different types of boundaries in pursuit of what he desired. Thus, Yasha transcends his religious and social background when he becomes Reb Jacob the Penitent. This transcending figure reemerges in the next novel as Jacob the slave who can completely dispense with magic, with flight and even with liberty because his superiority is innate. He is physically and intellectually above those around him. He violates religious and social norms by marrying a gentile. Through infraction, Jacob and the equally superior Wanda/Sarah achieve the ideal relationship lesser beings cannot even dream of.

Jacob may have been capable of accepting captivity and limitation with equanimity, but Singer was not. After writing The Slave, Singer resumed his obstinate Yasha-like experimentations with the modification of reality by playing with gender, and with time. In The Magician of Lublin, Singer had already created the airy Magda who was flat-chested as a

boy. Then in Enemies, Singer appears to have crossed gender boundaries himself. He made Masha the magician of love (who could stop her period at will) and the narrative artist capable of excelling in several different genres. Singer's self-feminization--his identification with Masha--in this novel is confirmed by the fact that Masha is the one who, like Yasha, consigns herself to a tomb-womb. In Shosha, Singer regains his male identity and culminates his gender-testing by creating two androgynous beings: Betty and Shosha. He chooses to marry Shosha because she lacks all that is frightening in femaleness, and also because through her (and with her) he can extend his undertakings by travelling through time in continued pursuit of his desires.

Singer's desire is not enough to make the search for love a complete success. The type of relationship he and his heroes pursue contains the seed of its own destruction because it remains idealistic and rejects reproduction and family life. Though there are two surviving children in the novels, Jacob's son and Herman's daughter, they are, like Singer's own son, not brought up by the two parents together. There doesn't seem to be any possibility for intact family life in any of these works. Singer and his heroes desire a pre-social world which, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in The Social Construction of Reality say, "is fully transparent to them" because they "have shaped it [with their women] in the course of a shared

biography."¹ The searchers seem incapable of making the transition to a social world because when children come "playfulness is lost" and life becomes serious business in which a joyful "here we go again" is replaced by "this is how things are done" (p.59).

Paradoxically, though children spoil the type of love the heroes want, the quest follows a trajectory which never completely deviates from the childlike. Singer's first tales were fabulous, wish-fulfilling fantasies, and the novels contain slightly revised versions of the childhood wishes and explicitly evoke fairy tales.

Singer's oeuvre revises his childhood. And, though the fiction shows him wanting to be his own creator, the search for idealized love sometimes looks suspiciously like a quest for a mother. We see that Yasha, Herman, and Aaron feel rather comfortable in the homes of their mothers-in-law where they can enjoy the privileges of a preferred son, can possess the mother vicariously through their daughters, and are exempt from ever having to confront the father because he is absent. When the heroes' women become mothers, they are no longer exclusive devotees and they pose other dangers. Emilia is a mother Yasha Mazur can possess directly. However, Yasha's metamorphosis from winged footed Hermes/Mercury into limping middle-age man is very revealing. Yasha, when trying to do

¹Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) p.59. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

what is necessary to gain Emilia, becomes a swollen footed man who walks with a limp; he becomes Oedipus.

Perhaps Singer's main conflict was oedipal. Perhaps the fear to possess the mother directly was the main reason he and his heroes ran away from their women after they had children. Singer and his protagonists may have wanted no competition from real children in order to retain that status themselves.

However, it is equally likely that Singer's adherence to the childlike was his way of preserving his creativity and his idealism so that he could continue striving for a male-female relationship which is clearly possible, but not yet achieved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- Singer, Isaac B. The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories. New York: New American Library, 1989.
- _____. Enemies, A Love Story. Trans. by Aliza Shevrin and Elizabeth Shub. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972.
- _____. The Family Moskat. Translated by A. H. Gross. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1950.
- _____. Gimble the Fool and Other Stories. New York: Nooday Press, 1957.
- _____. The Image and Other Stories. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985.
- _____. In My Father's Court. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1966.
- _____. "I See the Child as a Last Refuge," New York Times Book Review, Nov. 9, 1969, pp.1, 66.
- _____. An Isaac Bashevis Singer Reader New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971.
- _____. The King of The Fields. New York: New American Library, 1988.
- _____. Love and Exile. New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1984.
- _____. Lost in America. New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1981.
- _____. The Magician of Lublin. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1980.
- _____. Nobel Lecture. New York: Farrar Straus, 1978.

_____. The Penitent. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983.

_____. The Power of Light. Pictures by Irene Lieblich. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980.

_____. Remembrances of a Rabbi's Son. Trans. by Rena Borrow with a lithograph by Chaim Gross. New York: The UJA Federation Campaign, Inc., 1984.

_____. Satan in Goray. Trans. by Jacob Sloan. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1955.

_____. Scum. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991.

_____. Shosha. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1978.

_____. The Slave. New York: Avon Books, 1964.

_____. Stories for Children. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984.

_____. "Yes . . ." Yiddish 6. 2-3 (1985): 157-167.

Singer, I. Joshua. Of a World That Is No More. Translated by Joseph Singer. New York: The Vanguard Press, 1970.

Secondary Sources

Alexander, Edward. Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Study of the Short Fiction. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990.

Allentuck, Marcia. ed. The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969.

Alter, Robert. "Jewish Dreams and Nightmares" Contemporary American Jewish Literature. Ed. Edward Malin. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1973. 58-77.

Beck, Evelyn Torton. "The Many Faces of Eve: Women, Yiddish and Isaac Bashevis Singer." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 112-123.

- Berger Peter, and Luckmann Thomas. The Social Construction of Reality New York: Anchor Books, 1967.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. The Uses of Enchantment. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Bilik, Dorothy. Immigrant Survivors: Post Holocaust Consciousness. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981.
- _____. "Singer's Diasporan Novel: Enemies, A Love Story." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 90-100.
- Bloom, Harold. "Isaac Bashevis Singer's Jeremiad," New York Times Book Review (September 25, 1983): 3, 26-27.
- Brodsky, Joseph. "The Condition We Call Exile" The New York Review of Books (Jan. 1988): 17-19.
- Buchen, Irving. I. B. Singer and the Eternal Past. New York: New York University Press, 1968.
- _____. "The Devil and I. B. Singer." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 24-31.
- Burgin, Richard. Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1985.
- Cech, John. "Sendak's Mythic Childhood," Children's Literature 10 (1982): 70-79.
- Chandler, Marilyn. "Death by the Word: Victims of Language in Enemies, A Love Story." Studies in American Jewish Literature 7 (Spring 1988): 105-117.
- Chayefsky, Paddy. "Of Dybbuks and Devilkins." Reporter (April 22, 1965): 40-43.
- Collar, Mary L. "In His Father House: Singer, Folklore, and the Meaning of Time." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 37-51.
- Colwin, Laurie. "Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer" New York Times Book Review, July 23, 1978.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Farrel, Lee Grace. From Exile to Redemption. Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

- Feuerbach, Ludwig. The Essence of Christianity. Trans. by George Eliot. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957.
- Fielder, Leslie. "Isaac Bashevis Singer; Or, the American-ness of the American Jewish Writer." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 123-131.
- Forrey, Robert. "The Sorrows of Herman Broder: Singer's Enemies, A Love Story." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 101-106.
- Freud, Sigmund. Moses and Monotheism. Trans. by Katherine Jones. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.
- Fried, Lewis. The Magician of Lulin: I. B. Singer's Ironic Man of Faith." Yiddish 2.1 (1975), 60-69.
- Friedman, Lawrence S. Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer. Columbia: University of South Press, 1988.
- Gittleman, Sol. From Shtetl to Suburbia: The Family in Jewish Literary Imagination. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- Golub, Mark S. "A Shmues with Isaac Bashevis Singer." Studies in American Jewish Literature, 1 (1981): 169-175.
- Gordon, Andrew. "Science-Fiction and Fantasy Film Criticism: The Case of Lucas and Spielberg," Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 2.2 (Summer 1989): 81-94.
- Howe, Irving. "Demonic Fiction of a Yiddish 'Modernist.'" Commentary (October 1960): 350-53.
- _____. "Introduction to Yiddish Literature" Breakthrough: A Treasure of Contemporary American Literature. ed. Irving Malin and Irwin Stark. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965, pp.278-300.
- Hughes, Ted. "The Genius of Isaac Bashevis Singer." New York Review of Books (April 22, 1965): 8-10.
- Kotzin, Michael. "The Uses of Enchantment in Singer's Children's Stories." Yiddish 5 (1982-84): 5-21.
- Kresh, Paul. The Magician of 86th Street. New York: The Dial Press, 1979.
- Landis, Joseph. "I. B. Singer--Alone in the Forest." Yiddish 6 (1985): 5-23.

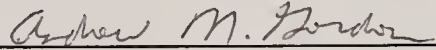
- Levitan, Elsie. "The Cosmos of Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Critical View." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 138-147.
- Lyons, Bonnie. "Sexual Love in I. B. Singer's Work." Studies in American Jewish Literature, 1 (1981) pp.61-74.
- Madison, Charles A. Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.
- Malin, Irving. ed. Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer. New York: New York University Press, 1969.
- Miller, Alice. Thou Shalt Not Be Aware. Translated by Hildegard and Hunter Hannum. New York: New American Library, 1986.
- Miller, David Neal. Fear of Fiction: Narrative Strategies in the Works of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.
- _____. Recovering the Canon. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986.
- Ong, Walter J. Orality and Literacy. New York: Methuen, 1982.
- Paris, Bernard. "The Tempest: Shakespeare's Ideal Solution, Shakespeare's Personality ed. N. Holland, S. Homan and B. Paris. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- _____. Third Force Psychology and the Study of Literature. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986.
- Piaget, Jean. The Moral Judgment of the Child. Chicago: The Free Press, 1960.
- Pladott, Dinah. "Casanova or Schlemiel? The Don Juan Archetype in I. B. Singer's Fiction." Yiddish 6. 2-3 (Summer-Fall, 1985): 55-71.
- Riesman, David. The Lonely Crowd. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1950.
- Ringold, Francine. "'My Dear Friend' Isaac Bashevis Singer, An Interview," Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981): 161-168.

- Rosenblatt, Paul and Koppel, Gene. On Literature and Life: An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1971.
- Sacks, Oliver. "The 'Dark, Paradoxical Gift.'" The New York Review of Books (April 11, 1991): 7-8.
- Saposnik, Iring S. "Yasha Mazur and Harry Houdini The Old Magic and the New." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1 (1981) 52-59.
- Seed, David. "The Community in I. B. Singer's Fiction." Yiddish 4,2 (1980): 5-20.
- Sidney, Philip. "An Apology for Poetry," Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams New York: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, 1917. 155-177.
- Sinclair, Clive The Brothers Singer. London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1983.
- Sontag, Susan. "Demons and Dreams." Partisan Review (Summer 1962): 460-463.
- Steinberg, Theodore L. "I. B. Singer: Responses to Catastrophe." Yiddish 1.4 (1975): 9-16.
- Straus, Dorothea. Under the Canopy. New York: George Braziller, 1982.
- Thomas, Lewis. A Long Line of Cells. New York: Book of the Month Club, 1990.
- Wielseletier, Leon. "The Revenge of I. B. Singer." The New York Review of Books (December 7, 1978): 6-7.
- Wirth, Louis. "Preface." Ideology and Utopia by Karl Mannheim. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1936.
- Wisse, Ruth. "Singer's Paradoxical Progress." Studies in American Jewish Literature 1-2 (1981-82): 148-159.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA


I was born (Feb. 1, 1939) in Cumanacoa, a sugar-cane valley in Sucre, a historically important but very poor state in Venezuela. The oldest of seven children in a land-owning family, I had a childhood made both idyllic and irksome by the now rare magic of full-time parents who gently enforced family routines. My parents taught us to love music and literature, and my father and his brother seemed to travel just to be able to buy books for us. After elementary school in Cumanacoa, secondary school in Cumaná, and College in Caracas, I bedazzled myself by being able to win a Fulbright scholarship to attend Columbia University in New York City, where I got my M.A. in 1966. During the seventies, I also did post-M.A. work at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. I have taught in this country and in Venezuela and I am now an Associate Professor of Literature at Universidad de Oriente, Cumaná, Venezuela. I came to the University of Florida in August of 1989 to get a Ph.D. as invigoration for both myself and the English Department at Universidad de Oriente. I am married to Thomas Wolcott Gibbons. The two of us will return to Venezuela where, after three years of the depressing reality of the Reagan/Bush job market, Thomas will be able to resume his quasi-fantastic existence as a coffee-grower and reader of philosophy and history, and I will go back to the truly fantastic life of reading and writing for pleasure and of attempting to persuade undergraduates that they actually do love to read good books.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



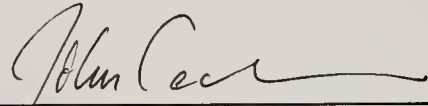
Andrew M. Gordon, Chair
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



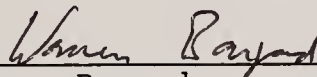
Bernard Paris
Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



John Cech
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Warren Bargad
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Sheldon Isenberg
Associate Professor of Religion

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

August 1992

Dean, Graduate School

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA



3 1262 08553 7461